

The full, complete, extensive, definite, Director's Cut timeline of the TrollCops Radio Drama canon timeline and story.

Established by [waveridingHonchopal](#)

Maintained and updated by [BulletNick](#)

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Partial Worldbuilding Timeline by waveridingHonchopal

Unknown period BGS (Before Green Sun): Doc Scratch comes into existence.

398 BGS: 413 years before the story starts, Alternia City is founded by the Signless and his group of rebels against the tyranny of the Troll Empire and Her Imperious Condescension.

369 BGS: Alternia City is attacked by the Condesce's forces; Captain Spinneret Mindfang of the Mindfang Pirates leads the attack and earns a hereditary marquise, becoming the First Marquise Spinneret of the House of Serket; the Dolorosa is given to her as a slave; Redglare is killed; the Sufferer is captured and executed as an example to all who would oppose Her Imperious Condescension's rule. The Disciple survives to write down the Sufferer's message of tolerance and acceptance; E%ecutor Darkleer, of the noble House of Zahhak, secretly helps her spread the message.

314 BGS: The Treaty of Beforus results in the Troll Empire handing over Alternia City to the Kingdom of Prospit. The White King of Prospit decides to make the city a hotspot of culture and knowledge, and over the first decade of Prospitian control, founds both the prestigious Alternia University and the monumental Alternia City Library.

100-92 BGS: The Last Great Carapacian War between the Kingdoms of Prospit and Derse. After years of stalemate and trench warfare, Derse starts winning, until the battle reaches the farm of one Wayne Vim. His farm destroyed, Vim leads a coalition of Dersite and Prospitian rebels who don't want to fight each other against those he views as the REAL problems: the White and Black Kings of Prospit and Derse. The Black King falls to a mob of angry Carapacians, led by a Dersite berserker named Jack Noir. The next in line to the throne, his brother, Baron Kaiser, wisely decides to surrender. The White King is far more gracious about the whole thing, abdicating his own throne to become Writ Keeper for his pride and joy, the Alternia City Library. Prospit and Derse are united as the New Carapacian Republic. During the treaty machinations, Alternia City once again falls under the dominion of the Troll Empire.

89 BGS: Baron Kaiser becomes Mayor of Alternia City.

70-64 BGS: The Great War between the Human Tribes and the Troll Empire. Although Alternia City was founded by trolls, it was specifically founded by rebels against the Condesce's regime. Rufioh Nitram invokes the Sufferer's memory and Summons the people of the city to fight against the Condesce. During the war, the Mindfang Pirates, under the leadership of the Sixth Marquise Spinneret (Vriska is the Eighth), blockade the port alongside the Condesce's fleet, led by Admiral Orphaner Dualscar, until the endgame of the war when it becomes apparent that the Condesce will lose; she then turns on the fleet and kills Dualscar. Unfortunately for her, the quick change of sides earns her no favor from either side, and the House of Serket goes into a rapid decline. The humans win, and the Condesce goes into hiding. Rufioh Nitram rises to fame and fortune for his role in overthrowing the Condesce, and the House of Nitram replaces the House of Serket as one of the Great High Houses.

66 BGS: Maud Sassacre (John's Nanna) born to the legendary Colonel Sassacre, prankster extraordinaire and head of the city's garrison, based out of the newly constructed Fort Skaian.

64 BGS: Hass Harley (Jade's Grandpa) born.

62 BGS: The Watchful Vigilante makes his first appearance on the scene, fighting the corrupt Kaiser administration.

59 BGS: Colonel Sassacre remarries, to the mysterious Betty Crocker, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the Condesce...

53 BGS: Maud runs away from home, takes shelter at the Harley home.

50 BGS: Harley home burned down under mysterious circumstances. Hass Harley rescues Maud Sassacre from the blaze, earning the nickname "The Flame." Beloved pet Halley Harley is not as lucky.

46 BGS: Hass "The Flame" Harley leaves to travel the world. A technological genius, he wants to see how other cultures do the technology thing. He also goes to participate in archaeological digs, to investigate the strange works of the mysterious Skaians, and he takes the opportunity to do some big game hunting. Maud Sassacre

remains in Alternia City.

45 BGS: Mobster Kingpin, at the height of his power, suffers an historic defeat at the hands of Problem Sleuth, Ace Dick, and Pickle Inspector.

43 BGS: Maud Sassacre meets Justin Egbert working part-time at one of her father's comic shops.

42 BGS: Colonel Sassacre dies. The Sassacre fortune is split between Maud (who inherits most of the business assets, such as joke and comic shops) and Betty Crocker.

39 BGS: Maud Sassacre marries Justin Egbert and becomes Maud Egbert.

31 BGS: James Egbert (John's Dad) born to Justin and Maud Egbert.

29 BGS: Lillian Lalonde (Rose's Mom) born. Vivian Jones (later Egbert, John's Mom) born.

28 BGS: Baron Kaiser, going increasingly power-mad, fires his entire senior staff. Shunned, his five senior officers change their names (Slick, Droog, Boxcars, Deuce, and Queen) and form their own criminal gang, the Midnight Crew.

24 BGS: Ambrose "Bro" Strider born.

23 BGS: First clash between the Midnight Crew and the city's dominant, Baron-sponsored gang, the Felt.

13 BGS: Maud Egbert dies in a tragic accident involving a ladder and a first edition copy of her father's masterwork. (Justin Egbert had died a few years prior.) Meanwhile, the House of one Horuss Zahhak welcome their firstborn son Equius into the world.

12 BGS: Hass Harley finds evidence that several potentially powerful Skaian artifacts may in fact lie beneath Alternia City itself, and returns to Alternia City, where he begins construction on the architecturally unusual Harley Tower on his estate outside of town. House Ampora welcomes Eridan into the world.

11 BGS: So apparently, at some point on his travels, Hass Harley had a son. And apparently, that son got married. And apparently, he died of some tropical disease. And apparently, his wife died shortly after in childbirth. Whatever the hell happened, baby Jade Harley is sent to live with her Grandpa at Harley Tower. The Flame dotes over his granddaughter, and buys her a puppy named Becquerel. Terezi and Sollux are also born to the Pyropes of Hiveburg and the Captors of the Settlements, respectively. James Egbert marries Vivian Jones. Meanwhile, Bro Strider's parents are killed by a thug in an alleyway. Vowing revenge on the criminal element of the city, he schools himself in the ninja arts and becomes the vigilante superhero Seppukrow.

10 BGS: John Egbert, Karkat Vantas, Tavros Nitram, and Aradia Megido are all born. 19-year-old Lillian Lalonde discovers a pair of wands while drunkenly stumbling through an alley. She takes them to the person she deems most likely to know what the hell they are, former adventurer archaeologist Hass "The Flame" Harley. This is the first hard evidence that the Flame's theories may in fact be correct, and it marks the beginning of a beautiful partnership.

9 BGS: Lillian Lalonde has an ill-fated encounter with the sexually unsure 15-year-old Bro Strider. In a last-ditch effort by Bro to convince himself that he's straight (he's not), they have sex, and that night results in twins nine months later. They agree to each take one to raise themselves; Lillian goes off with young Rose, and Bro takes Dave under his wing. Meanwhile, a pair of kindly trolls, Dr. Maryam and Dr. Maryam of the Maryam Free Clinic, welcome a daughter, Kanaya, into the world.

8 BGS: Vriska Serket and Gamzee Makara are born.

7 BGS: Feferi Peixes is born. Terezi starts playing with the boy next door, Karkat.

4 BGS: Nepeta Leijon is born.

"Introduction" by BulletNick

Welcome to Alternia. This is not your usual alien city, for it is both very similar and yet very different to your own. Here, many species coexist within the same cities. Amongst them are humans, like the ones you know, but there are also trolls, humanoid creatures with grey skin and orange horns of many sizes and shapes, as well as having blood colours all over the spectrum, and with it their unique caste system. These are the quite a few species on this planet, and you may also occasionally see some carapacians, leprechauns and consorts on the streets.

Our stories focus on one of the biggest cities on the planet, where the streets are bustling, the shops are loud and packed, and there's always something going on. Unfortunately, many times the activity comes from the city's infamous criminals and gangs. This large city has a long and complicated history, and is not known for dispensing merciful or gentle justice. Conflicts amongst species and the different social classes has inevitably created a city filled with criminals, illegal activity, rival gangs, crime and bloodshed. These activities aren't hidden or even hindered in the daylight, and they run rampant across the poorest, darkest, and outermost parts of the town.

But fear not, citizen! There is a force out there protecting you! You have the Alternian Police Department, the APD, watching your back and cleaning the streets. These brave officers put their life on the line to keep the city safe and will do anything for their duty and their home. The best officer on the force is the famous Terezi Pyrope. She's one of the top veterans, with a long and honourable record for seeking justice, punishing criminals with maximum efficiency, and protecting the innocents...as much as possible, at least.

Miss Pyrope was blinded as a teenager when she stared at the Green Sun during the disaster that devastated us all years ago. But such was her thirst and desire for justice that she was undeterred, and she learned how to 'see' the world through her nose and tongue, and quickly climbed the ranks to establish herself as one of the most dedicated, cunning, vicious and smart policewoman that the city has ever seen. She will stop at nothing to do what's right. Criminals beware, if she catches you, you're headed to jail, with no chance of bail!

Her partner is the somewhat newer but still efficient Sollux Captor. Captor suffers from an unfortunate case of bipolarity and obsession with duality, as well as having powerful psychic abilities that can easily get out of control. But in a city where we have so few to protect so many, Captor's powers, proficiency and ease with computers and willingness to make sure the law is obeyed are all very useful and needed around

here, and make him a good officer. Captor and Pyrope are an odd match that doesn't always see eye to eye, but together they make one of the most feared duos in the city, working together day and night.

Other officers include the freakishly strong Equius Zahhak, a calm but tough officer that enforces strict adherence to rules and regulations. Unfortunately, this often causes damage out in the streets when his strength goes unchecked, or when he runs out of towels to dry himself off with due to sweating problems and him being easily flustered. His partner is Aradia Megido, a robotic officer with the soul of a deceased officer inside. Though she sounds and looks dead, she's still a valued part of the APD, mostly taking care of smaller offences and paperwork, as well as calming officer Zahhak down.

Lastly, we have a Vriska Serket...but truth be told, there's something fishy about her, and we're not quite sure who's side she's on...but she somehow managed to convince everyone to get her into the APD. Keep an eye on her. We also occasionally get help from a certain detective, Eridan Ampora, who is mostly useless and clueless, helpful only when he focuses on the job, as well as medical examiner Kanaya Maryam healing our officers in the clinic and performing autopsies, sometimes providing vital information for solving cases and chasing down criminals. We also have Miss Feferi Peixes, a young and chirpy relative of the mayor who makes sure we are provided with resources and helps us deal with the paperwork. Also in charge of making Sollux Captor blush every time she visits, no idea why. And taking charge of the situation, we have Mayor Wayne Vim and Commissioner Armstrong Righteous, leading the strong arms of democracy and law.

With such a crew on our side, and so many supports and assistants, surely they must've taken care of all the criminals long ago, right? Unfortunately, the police are few and the city is gigantic, and thus, many gangs have formed, that to this day even some of the oldest gangsters have remained mostly unhindered in their life of crime. A small but nevertheless successful gang is the Karkat Gang. It was founded by Karkat Vantas, a small-time criminal with a short temper, an affinity for very colourful language and no hesitation in using violence to accomplish his goals. He used to steal and take mostly only for himself, but now has taken two fellow trolls under his command to aid him in his unlawful activities, taking active role as leader, putting far behind him his days where he stole and fought only for survival.

Joining him are Nepeta Leijon, a cat-obsessed young troll girl, who uses sharp claws to defend herself should violence ever be used, which she very much dislikes. She is mostly harmless and does not intend to hurt anyone, but will use force if stressed or cornered and follow Karkat's orders, specifically since we have suspicious that she is somewhat fond of him. Last but not least, we have Gamzee Makara, a drug-addict with

clown make-up, but don't be fooled by his ridiculous appearance and seemingly unshakeable calmness. He has eluded the APD more times than they would like to admit and seems to be a surprising force to be reckoned with when angered.

Many gangs compete for the title of being the most powerful in the city. First of all we have our local mob boss, Mr Pupa. Once a young troll confined to a wheelchair and a lonely life of wealth, now he controls a large portion of the city, possibly including the aforementioned Karkat Gang, and he is almost untouchable in his reputation as being seemingly kind and generous but nevertheless ruthless and cunning. Everyone knows that his public persona, Tavros Nitram, is just a figure to inspire pity and weakness into you, citizen! Do not believe his lies!

One of the most dangerous carapacian gangs is the Midnight Crew. Despite being founded by just four carapacians, it is infamous for being determined, capable and able to engage in lethal hand-to-hand combat with ease. Their leader, Spades Slick, is a master of knives and has nothing but despise, and has no patience for whomever gets in his way. Their most fierce rival gang is the Felt, a strange leprechaun gang that has a wide array of time powers that are mind-bending and unpredictable when combined, led by the mysterious and unseen L.E. There are many other criminals out there, citizen, but these are the one you must be the most wary of.

The city's long history of crime has also inspired many other citizens to take a stand of their own in defending the city, such as Egbertman, a young human that seems to bend the wind at will, and pranking unaware criminals for laughs. We have Rose Lalonde of SEER, providing otherwise rare inside information on crimes, should you be able to decipher her riddles and words. A young man that goes by the name Strider has created his own mafia manned by his time-travel clones, but that often acts independently of the APD's or gangs' wishes, for its own purposes. Terezi seems to have taken a mysterious interest in this young boy as well. Lastly we have the elusive Space Lass, a young girl that is rumoured to be able to teleport and is a crack shot with her rifle.

Perhaps this all seems like a little too much information! Perhaps now you're too scared to even leave your home! You wonder if the Karkat Gang will corner you, if you'll get caught in a gunfight between the Crew and the Felt, or just have an unseen encounter with a hero or villain we don't even know about! Well, dear citizen, fear not. It is our duty to protect you and make sure you get home safe. Rest well, for we have our top officers on the job. Terezi Pyrope and Sollux Captor at your service! Criminals and villains beware, for they are...TrollCops.

"Captor and Culler" by Wigmund

It wa2 another long damn night.

Zollux wa2 2o damned tiired of all the 2hiit he had 2o deal wiith. Fiir2t iit wa2 the damned Karkat gang tryiing 2o liift some more kiitten2, then they had another one of tho2e 2ecret W11zard2 2how up and cau2e 2hiit and now thii2.

He found him2elf at the Alterniian Mu2eum of Natural Hii2tory, apparently 2ome 2ociiopath decided that iit wa2 a great tiime 2o break iin here and make Officer Captor'2 liife 2hiit.

Zollux 2iighed a2 he walked through the dii2play2 coveriing "The Wonderful Hi2tory Of Cephalopod2". Iit wa2 kiind of iintere2tiing. Zollux never had tiime 2o go out and enjoy hiim2elf, he wa2 alway2 workiing...haviing 2o deal wiith the ciity'2 2hiithead2.

The poliice offiicer found hiim2elf gaziing at a podiium explaiiniing the wonder2 of cephalopod iintelliigence (niice there wa2 2omethiing iintelligent iin thii2 iin2ane town) when he heard the 2ound of breakiing gla22. Damn. Look2 liike thii2 vacatiion wa2 never meant 2o bee.

He adju2ted hii2 gla22e2 and then 2talked down the hall, tryiing 2o fiind the 2ource of the noiie. He wa2 about 2o giive up, but then he notiiced a movement iin the 2hadow2.

"Thiith iith Offither Tholluth Captor of the Alterniian Polithe. Put you handth up and come out!"

Zollux liit up hii2 eye2 2o let the perp know he meant bu2iine22. He moved 2o that he had a good angle on the perp in ca2e they tried 2omethiing and he wouldn't have 2o worry about damagiing the entiire mu2eum.

"Handth up and come out. Ii wiill not hethiitate iin blathtiing everythiing here 2o deal wiith you."

He heard a giiggle from the 2hadows...iit 2ounded kiinda cute.

"O)(my, t)(at lisp...it's just so glubbing cute."

"Ii'm not goiing 2o warn you agaiin. Come-"

Before Zollux had a chance 2o fiinii2h hii2 threat, the criimiinal came out of the 2hadow2....

Damn...2he wa2 cute.

2he wa2 weariiing 2ome kiind of 2kiin-tiight 2wiin2uiit that fiit her quiite well...very very well 2ollux notiiced. From her back projected 6 tentacle2...well, they were really over2iized piipecleaner2, but the iintent wa2 apparent. 2he wore a paiir of black-rimmed goggle2 wiith a 2liight tiintiing that hiid her eye2 ju2t enough two make them my2teriou2...and very alluriing. Finally, the crimiinal had a black hood that covered mo2t of her head except for a pair of elegantly curved horn2.

He wa2 dealiing wiith another crazy. A cute one, but another crazy.

"Are you going two giive yourthelf up or do II have two make a methh out of the mutheum."

The my2tery woman walked riight up to the nervou2 poliice officer and leaned iintwo him. He tried and failed two not blu2h.

"Now we can't)(ave t)(at. It would ruin all of t)(e cep)(alopod displays-"

2he then 2tarted two poke the button2 on 2ollux'2 uniiform tiickiing off each one from the bottom up

"And. we. just. can't.)(ave. t)(at."

2ollux backed up away from her a2 2he giiggled. Damn that cute giiggle.

"Identiify yourthelf."

"O)(my, you are just too CUT-----E!!!

If you must know - I am the CUTTL-EFIS)(CULL-ER!

Terror of t)(e deeps of Alternia City!"

The Culler then liit up the liight2 of the mu2eum 2omehow two reveal her2elf more clearly. 2ollux tried two not notiice that 2he wa2 even cuter iin the liight2.

He then notiiced the Pii2ce2 2ymbol on her che2t. Ye2, he wa2 ju2t lookiing at the famiiliiar 2ymbol.

Nothiing el2e.

Fuckiing pervert2.

"Waiit...you look famiiliiar..."

The Culler looked around nervou2ly and fiidgeted.

"U)(...)(ow could t)(at be Officer Captor. T)(is is t)(e first time we've met."

2he hiid her face a2 she blu2hed fiercelly. Iit wa2 then that 2ollux remembered where

he had seen her before.

"You run that orphanage over in the Thetlementh.

And I thwear you are altho the aiide to Mayor Wayne Vaiin. You're Feferii Peiitheth aren't you?"

The Culler clapped her hand to her mouth when he said this. Bingo.

"How could you..."

"Well, you diithguith the iith kinda eathy to thee through iif you look clothely..."

Oop, with that slip she covered up her chest and smiled coyly at Sollux.

"O)(Sollux."

He couldn't help himself and positively glowed in embarrassment. She bubbled at him in amusement.

"You're the first person to see the (roug)(my brilliant disguise."

Sollux took a moment to recompose himself.

"Actually, all you change with your goggleth. Only an idiot wouldn't notice. But then, the thing with overrun with idiotth."

Feferii walked up to Sollux and threw her arms around his neck and moved in too close to him, but he stopped her by placing two fingers upon her beautiful black lips.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to bring you in. Breaking and entering...and judging from that thack over there...theft as well."

The Culler frowned and then presented her wrist to Officer Captor.

"Well, then I guess that means you need to cuff me."

Sollux moved her hand behind her and began to put the handcuff on. She leaned back into him and purred.

"(mmm...I like it when men play rough)(and)(ard to get."

She then turned around, kissed him on the cheek and then spun away from him, fake tentacles and other...but bouncing as she did so.

"But I'm afraid I have to squirt my ink and jet.

Just remember my little fish(stick, this was the nig)(t you almost caught-

T)(-E CUTTL-EFIS)(CULL-----ER!!!!"

And with that, she clambered up a pillar and disappeared through the museum's skylight...

And Officer Sollux Captor noticed that she had somehow escaped the cuffs and placed them on his wrist.

"Well, this."

Eventually, 2ollux got hold of hii2 key2 and freed hiim2elf. He left the mu2eum and found Detective Terezii Pyrope waitiing for hiim.

"You f1nd our p3rp, Off1c3r 4ppl3b3rry?"

2ollux looked up at hi2 partner and 2hrugged iin defeat.

"Nope, II diidn't fiind anythiing."

He got iintwo the 2quad car and they headed back two HQ. Duriing the driive Terezii leaned over and took a deep 2niiff.

"Yum...Gr4p3..."

2ollux froze.

"Ooh, 4nd 4 sudd3n 4ppl3b3rry bl4st."

2he 2at back up iin her 2eat and wa2 wearriing her usual ma22iive griin.

"Looks l1k3 som3th1ng found you ton1ght lov3rboy."

He kept driiviing, terriified two actually look at hii2 partner. Out of the corner of hii2 eye, he notiiced that 2he turned to face out of the pa22enger wiindow.

"So..."

Wh4t do3s sh3 c4ll h3rs3lf?"

"S.E.E.R." by Wigmund

(Society for the Elevation of Ectotechnological Research)

Rose sat idly in front of the computer that housed the vast archives of the National Library of Alternia City underneath the massive building that took up several blocks of City Central. She did not truly enjoy her job as the archivist of these records. But it was easy work and excellent pay. She usually spent her time reading long forgotten tomes about what was considered lost knowledge.

Well, not lost, just misplaced on the shelves by some idiot shelver decades ago and then idly tossed into the archive's department where it eventually ended up in Rose's paws.

But today, Rose was passing time by scanning the archives for any works on the lost Skaian ectotechnologies. Her other job needed some information that was most likely here. She smiled at the irony that what served as her cover job was now being used to help her real one.

Rose was a founding member and Oracle of S.E.E.R. - a secretive group devoted to finding the old technologies and artifacts of the Skaians and what came before. They operated in secret, but they didn't keep what they discovered secret...unless it was something dangerous - and most of what they found was dangerous, but the rest was made available to the public through a vast array of front companies who would claim the tech as their own inventions.

Rose smiled as she thought about the irony that she was also the secretive group's public face.

Well, in a way. She provided information to groups and individuals who needed it that was provided by old Skaian devices that could provide brief glimpses of possible futures and other tech that could communicate with the horrorterrors themselves. Usually it was the Alternian Police Department when they were stumped by some case involving one of the many gangs that roamed the city with access to Skaian ectotechnology that S.E.E.R. had not obtained itself, well, that is until said criminals are apprehended and S.E.E.R.'s mole in the APD made sure said tech mysteriously vanished from the police's lockup. But sometimes Rose found herself helping those groups that the APD worked against. Like with her own twin, Dave Strider who was both the mass murdering vigilante CrowBro and the head of the similarly violent Strider Mafia, both roles he was manipulated into by Rose herself to protect him and to gain access to the city's vast underworld.

Rose knew the dangers of both glimpsing the possible and talking directly with the old gods, but she was willing to do it if it meant the safety of her home and those she loved. It was ironic that in trying to protect her friends and loved ones, she used means that put them into harm's way. John, Jade, Kanaya. They were all threatened if someone found out their secrets.

The Oracle was interrupted from her daydreaming by her communicator...it was the APD's...chiming to get her attention. She brought it up on her personal laptop and waited to see who was trying to get ahold of her.

It was Kanaya.

Rose sighed in relief. Kanaya was never used by the APD to contact her for business, this was a personal call.

"Greetings Officer, how may the Oracle help you today?"

Kanaya smiled over the webcam feed. Unfortunately at this time, there was never a similar feed going out from Rose to whomever was contacting her. It was safer that way. But at times like this, it made her feel so terribly lonely because this was the only way for weeks at a time she could see those she loved. But this lack of sight on Kanaya's part didn't stop Rose from smiling as well.

"Salutations To You As Well Oracle. I Indeed Needed Your Help With Something Of Dreadful Importance."

"What is that Medical Officer Maryam?"

"Oh My, You Mysteriously Figured Out My Identity. Your Powers Are Quite Great, Seer."

Rose couldn't help but enjoy the sarcastic banter and she waited for Kanaya to continue.

"I Was Wondering If You Had Foreseen Any Free Time For Yourself Within The Next Two Weeks."

"Let me consult my sources..."

"Of Course You Do Rose."

"Alright, alright. Why do you ask?"

"Well, It Is Due To My Recent Choice To Use Several Weeks Worth Of Vacation That I Had Accrued During My Time Working With The Police Department."

"Paid vacation sounds lovely."

"It Is. And I Was Wondering That If You Would Be Open To Passing These Next Two Weeks Together?"

Considering How Irregularly And How Little Time We Spend With Each Other, I Have Missed You Terribly."

Rose leaned back and looked over at the archival computer. She had built up several

weeks worth of vacation herself from the Library and the search for those books had no deadline.

Rose made her decision.

"Of course my love.

I can't wait to see you again and for what will be a too short period of time."

"Rain" by CaptainCynic

It's raining. Again. Why is it always raining in this town? It's as though the gods of precipitation have taken a particular interest in you and your doings. Not that it matters. Your carapace keeps out the cold and water, and your hat keeps the rain out of your eyes. There is only one thing missing, and that is Slick. Where the !@#\$ is that guy!? You didn't plan out this heist just to get him to ruin it by running late! And Damnit, the polluted rain is getting on your suit. this suit is expensive! Slick had better have a DAMN good reason for being late, or there'll be hell to pay. Well, maybe not hell; he is your boss, after all. But you'll be very annoying and childish at the next planning session.....

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

Damn! Where is he!? Your window of opportunity is closing fast! At this rate the Felt will be back before you can make a clean getaway!

.
. .
. .

Suddenly, Boxcars runs up around the corner. Looks like he's had an unexpected donation of lead. Good thing the guy's built like a tank. But wait, where's Slick?, you ask. Ambush, he says. The Strider Mafia caught them in an alley. Fought 'em off, but Slick was injured. He needs your help.

.

Looks like the casino will have to wait.

.

Boxcars gives you a Look. Come on! the Boss-man is waiting, and his patience expired ten minutes ago!

Ten?, you ask, as you start moving at an elegant pace. Yeah, he says, 'Cause we got ambushed nine ago.

.

That makes sense.

.

As you head toward your foul-tempered boss, you wonder how it is that you are the only one of the Crew to have any skills not related to Sword Stabbing, Heavy Beating, or Constant Demolition. Sometimes you feel like you are Dr. DIY. Still, you remind yourself that at least you're in one of the more successful groups in town. It could be worse.

.

And now the rain has turned to hail. Why did you tempt reality? What good ever comes of saying "It could be worse"?

.
A car zips by, spraying your suit with mud. Even thinking it works. Damn.

"Hail" by CaptainCynic

("Rain, Part 2")

As you proceed towards you boss, you wonder what happened to Deuce. He should have been watching the entrance. You radio him to pull back, but he doesn't answer. That's not good, But you'll deal with it later.

:::

Around this corner, says Boxcars, and you follow him. The GETAWAY VAN is totalled; you'd be lucky to sell it for scrap now. Spades is trapped inside, but is relatively intact. you direct Boxcars to rip open the van, and start stitching up Slick. It's only a temporary measure, until you can capture Stitch and get him to do the real deal. Speaking of the Felt, you have to think of a way to get back at them. The Casino is probably a bust (No, not THAT kind of bust); Deuce must have given away the operation, and it'll be impossible now. Also, why would the Strider Mafia attack you? You haven't moved in on any of their rackets recently, not on the level that would elicit this kind of response.

:::

Shit. You have two gangs to get even with, both experts at time shit, and your effective manpower has been rather effectively depleted. The gang is more than just the four of you, but you're the ones who do the real work; the rest of the outfit is mostly debt collecting and intelligence gathering.

Speaking of outfits, it seems that despite your warnings Slick has bled on your suit. No amount of dry cleaning can save it now. There will be hell to pay for this.

Anyway, those gangs aren't going to deal with themselves-.....You begin to hatch a plan.

:::

Once you get back to the hideout, you tell Slick to play along, and start talking in range of one of your informants. The guy's a Felt sympathizer, a spy sent to undermine your organization. He wasn't very subtle, so you let him stay. Better the enemy you know and all that rot. Slick, you say. What's up with that big raid on the Strider warehouse? You know, the one with all the priceless art and stuff. What?, he begins to ask before you elbow him. Oh yeah, he says, the plan is to go for it in one week. Good, you say. With that you'll be the richest gang in town by far.

Yeah, says Slick, we'll own the place, and starts laughing maniacally. Sometimes you worry about that guy.

:::

No one ever accused the Felt of intelligence (Except for perhaps Crowbar) So they should buy it.

:::

Five days later, you hear that there's something going down in the Strider district. You head down there, sending Slick to team up with the Vantas mob and clear out the Felt's mansion. Slick may be the boss but he knows you're the brains and so he obeys.

Lo and behold, you arrive to the beautiful sight of the green corpses of several felt members interspersed with multiple strangely similar Strider corpses. Looks like the fight just finished; there's still gun smoke in the air. You probably got wind of it before it happened 'cause of time shit. You usually hate time shit, but it's nice to get here before the cops. You case the joint with Boxcars, loading the loot into a spare GETAWAY VAN you had parked inside your BRAWLSOLEUM. While doing so, you find a live Strider, and take him along for interrogation. Mission Fucking Accomplished.

:::

Back at the hideout, you meet Slick. He met with success, captured Stitch, and found a mostly unharmed Deuce to boot.

You both go to interrogate that one Strider. You took away all his time apparatus, so he's more or less harmless.

Why did you do it? You ask.

Do what? he responds.

Ambush Slick.

What?

You heard me.

We didn't!

Really. Then why were there dead Striders all over the street?

He gets a worried look on his face. Moments later, he's gone, and you think you know when.

Slick starts cursing.

Time shit, Slick says. It must be time shit. The ambushers said "This is for setting the Felt on us" , he says.

You think you need a chat with Stitch.

:::

You go to Stitch's cell. He, under heavy supervision, is fixing your effigys. He is probably the most useful member of the Felt, and therefore liable to net you a good ransom.

You have come for an answers.

One thing has been bothering you for a while: Why did they, one month ago, take over your speakeasy? You were at peace for months until that happened and sparked off this whole business.

Stitch, you detestable little worm, you shout.

Whaddaya want, ya useless prissy!? he responds.

Why'd you steal our speakeasy?

Pupa paid us good money for that.

Why?

Said you moved in on a real estate deal of his. Public housing or some shit like that.

Shit, you think.

What!? asks Slick.

I'll tell you later, you whisper. Damn, this is annoying.

:::

In the hall, you look at Slick. It's slightly freaky how his wounds heal while Stitch works.

What was that about Pupa's real estate? He asks.

I only just started planning that for next week, you say. Should net us a hefty sum and a couple of safe houses.

Old Pupa must have paid the felt to get back at us before we could do it. sort of like Pre-venge.

:::

So it's a form of double moebius revenge cycle.

:::

Have you mentioned how much you hate time shit?

"The Madman" by HarMegidon

Sollux Captor sighed. In the middle of the street, a man was ranting. He wore a stolen Cairo Overcoat, shades pilfered from one of the members of the Strider Mafia, a novelty Troll Horn headband with one horn broken, and a mysterious, albeit awesome looking shirt. He held a horrific puppet in one hand. "I AM THE AVATAR OF THE CREATOR! I AM HE WHO IS BEYOND THE FOURTH WALL" the mad preacher shouted. "Goddamnit Andrew, you keep doiing thi2" Captor said. Andrew replied "You fool! The end is coming! I shall escape from my attic by riding a luck dragon to freedom" He then recited the history of the city, which was surprisingly in-depth. "Huh. Never knew the mayor wa2 once a farmer" Sollux muttered. "Anyway, you're comiing wiith me. How many tiime2 have you broken out of the iin2ane a2ylum anyway?" Andrew followed him back without struggle. "We have to iincrea2e 2ecuriity here" Sollux said to nobody in particular. Meanwhile, Andrew sat in his room, alone. The door was unlocked and opened by a prospitian lady. As he escaped, she went back to repainting the ward.

"Chasing Midnight" by Redikalus

Karkat Vantas began to storm out of the alley. Nepeta Lejion sprung up from her crouched position and ran after him. She caught up, grabbed his sleeve and tried to pull him back, but to no avail.

:33< pl33ase don't go karkat!

I'M GOING AND THAT'S FINAL.

:33< but he doesn't care about you. we do!

Karkat stopped and paused to absorb her words before turning on her.

DON'T YOU DARE SAY THAT AGAIN! OF COURSE HE CARES ABOUT ME! HE TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING I KNOW!

Karkat yanked his sleeve out of her hands and started for the exit of the alley again.

:33< he's a cold hearted killer! we're your friends, but he purrbably thought of you tool than a friend. please don't go, he'll hurt you!

YOU'RE WRONG. HE WILL WELCOME ME BACK. BESIDES WE NEED SOME WAY TO GET FOOD FASTER, AND SINCE I ALREADY KNOW SLICK, I CAN'T THINK OF A BETTER WAY THAN JOINING UP WITH THE MIDNIGHT CREW.

Gamzee Makara shambles up to the pair in his usual stupor.

dOn'T wOrRy BrOtHeR... wE jUsT nEeD tO wAiT, a mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaClE iS sUrE tO hApPeN aNd wE'lL hAvE aLl ThE mOtHeRfUcKiNg tHiNgS wE nEeD. yOu DoN't HaVe To JoIn ThE nAsTiEsT oF cReWs.

:33< gamzees right! if we hold out a bit longer, things will get b3tt3r.

YOU IDIOTS. WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO COME WILL NEVER HELP. I JOIN IF WE ARE TO SURVIVE THE UPCOMING WINTER.

And with that Karkat ran off leaving Nepeta and Gamzee behind in the alleyway.

Gamzee stopped running and bent over, panting and out of breath. Nepeta ran a bit longer before turning around.

:33< come on! we n33d to hurry and find karkitty!

cAnT wE mOtHeRfUcKiNg ReSt fOr A wHiLe?

AnD cAn I hAvE mY sOpOr BaCk? :o(

:33< no! this is impurrtant! you n33d to stay focused until we find karkat!

:33< he's in trouble, I can f33l it.

Gamzee stood back up, having got a little bit of his breath back and looked around at the maze of streets, buildings and alleys.

BuT wE dOnT kNoW wErE hE oR tHe MoThErFuCkInG mIdNiGhT cReW iS.

:33< I know, but we have to k33p searching or it'll be too late!

wHy DoNt We AsK tHe MoThErFuCkInG cOpS? tHeY hAvE iNfO aNd StUff dOnT tHeY?

:33< yeah, but they wouldn't just give it away to thieves, much less the homeless.

:33< we will have to steal it.

i ThInK iF wE jUsT mOtHeRfUcKiNg AsK, tHeY'IL bE mIrAcUlOuSlY mErCiFuL aNd GiVe Us ThE iNfO.

Nepeta sighed and ran off to the police station.

Gamzee groaned at the prospect of running all the way over and chased after her.

Before Nepeta could stop him, Gamzee waltzed into the police department.

hEy MoThErFuCkErS, cArE tO hElP a BrOtHeR oUt.

There was a long pause as every cop turned to look towards Gamzee smiling stupidly in the door way. Eventually one broke the silence.

Isn't that that clown criminal?

D--> Get him!

The commotion that followed would be talked about for months. Nepeta sighed, she knew that wouldn't work, but at least it made a nice distraction. And she wasn't too worried about Gamzee, he would escape, he always did.

She slipped through the nearest window and past the commotion without anyone noticing. A purrfect entrance. She stalked down the halls until she found a door with four symbols above it. A spade, a diamond, a heart, and a club. Nepeta slid inside without a sound and looked around.

All over the room were maps and plans. Nepeta quickly went over to the nearest pile and started sifting through it. In a few minutes she had gone through most of the documents and found some police projections of where the midnight crew would strike next. Exactly what she was looking for.

Nepeta made her stealthy escape, but unfortunately, the commotion had died down and the cops were returning to their stations. She managed to slip out a window before Officers Pyrope and Captor came around a corner. After a small bit of searching she found Gamzee reclining on a bench, as if nothing had happened.

:33< come on! I think I know where karkitty is!

Nepeta hated the Foundry area. It smelt all wrong and it was too dangerous. And Karkat came here all alone. Even Gamzee was alert now, they had heard the Kingpin's Mob had this place completely under its thumb. But Nepeta knew that the Midnight Crew were planning something here and Karkat was likely to be here as well.

Lurking eyes followed the pair as they wandered through the narrow pathways between the factories. Chills went down Nepeta's spin as they heard a scream off in the distance. Too high to be Karkat's but Nepeta quickened their pace nonetheless. As they came upon the crossway of the small street they were on and an alleyway a

spot of red caught Nepeta's eye. She ran over to investigate and it was just as she feared; a trail of bright red blood. Nepeta whimpered to herself.

:33< please be a human's. please be a dersite's or prospitian's, just don't be...

As she trailed off she followed the trail of blood, first a trickle then a line, then a stream. As the trail got thicker Nepeta ran faster and the stench of blood and death got stronger. And then she found the source.

The body was covered in bruises and cuts and the area was covered in bright crimson. Nepeta felt sick. And then she saw it. On the soiled tatters of what was left of the victims clothes. A sideways 69. Nepeta screamed.

:33< karkat!

She leaped over to him and embraced his bloody body, sobbing uncontrollably.

Gamzee walked over and tried to pull Nepeta off of Karkat. Suddenly Nepeta stopped sobbing.

:33< a heartbeat! he's breathing!

:33< he's still alive! we n33d to save him!

Karkat woke up to pain. But he woke up. He was alive. After a few minutes of suffering, he managed to open his eyes. He saw grey skies framed by brown and red. Buildings, most likely somewhere in the settlements. Where was he last night? He remembers following the Midnight Crew to the Foundries and then he remembers... no, he doesn't want to remember.

He heard movement beside him, but he hurt too much, and felt too weak, to turn and look. The figures of Nepeta and Gamzee appeared over him.

:33< karkat! you're awake!

wElCoMe BaCk, My MoThErFuCkInG bRoThEr!

OH GOG, I HURT ALL OVER.

:33< oh, we're so glad you're alive. we thought you weren't going to make it!

NOT TO COMPLAIN ABOUT A GOOD THING, BUT HOW DID YOU SAVE ME?

:33< that's just it! we tried to stop the blood the best we could but you were fading fast. then gamz33 tripped over something!

A mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaCLe. sOmE fAnCy GaDgEt ThAt MiRaCLeD yOu RiGhT uP.

:33< who did it to you? was it the mob? or...

IT WAS... I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT...

:33< it's okay, everything's going to be okay now!

YEAH, IT BETTER.

Karkat went back to sleep, dreaming of better days.

"Egbertman vs. Feferi Peixes, Part 1" by Redikalus

It was a bright day in Alternia City and Egbertman was doing a routine patrol. Gazing at the skyline of the Glass City as he flew, he couldn't help but smile. He loved this city. He had so many good friends here and it had so many interesting sites. But he was saddened by the need for this persona, if only the city would have just one peaceful day, he would be much happier.

Egbertman shifted his course and drifted towards Dockside. This area of the city was most beautiful at this time. The sun just rising up, half of it above the horizon, spreading multicolored light across the bay. the smell of the sea fresh in the air, before any major activity at the docks corrupt the smell. The wildlife, such as the countless seagulls, the magnificent pelicans, the flying whales.

Wait, what?

The whale slammed into Egbertman and pushed him down towards the buildings below. He had to expend much of his mangrit, but he was able stop their descent just as the tips of buildings were beginning to tickle his back. It was just as he finished stabilizing his altitude when Egbertman noticed that the whale had a rider. As the rider climbed down the side of the whale he noticed they had a double ended trident strapped to their back and then he recognized who it was: Feferi Peixes, the mayor's daughter.

As Feferi was reaching Egbertman, she pulled out her trident and took a jab at him. Egbertman twists himself in order to avoid getting impaled and loses hold on the whale. He watched in horror as the whale began crashing down towards the buildings. Feferi lept from the whale and landed upon the top of the tallest building. She waited for the whale to almost completely pass her before grabbing hold of its tailfin and heaving it through the air. Egbertman breathed a sigh of relief when the whale was prevented from destroying many buildings, but he returned to horror when he saw Feferi swing the whale around and launch it back at him.

Jegus, she must be even stronger than he was.

Marquise Spinneret Mindfang, captain of the Mindfang pirates, watch the ensuing battle with glee. It was about time that blue-boy was on the receiving end of fish-girl's wrath and not her magnificent pirate ship. She was so engrossed in watching the battle that she barely noticed the feathery figure bring down her nearest crew and advance on her. Fortunately for her, the figure was not aiming to kill her, at least not yet. As the cries of her crew finally reached her ears, she spun around only to find a blade at her throat, held by a man wrapped in a cloak of feathers.

Crow8oy!!!!!!!!!!

its crowbro

and you have three seconds to stop controlling egbertman or feferi, whichever youre controlling, before i paint your ship blue with blood

Pffffffffft. I wish I had a hand in this!

yeah

not buying it

Pleeeeeeease!!!!!!! As weird as it sounds, miss fishface over there is too strong-wiiiiiiilled!

It must 8e her potent 8loooooooooodline!

and egbertman

You know I can't control humans!!!!!!! I can only put them to sleep! And 8lue-8oy over there definitely isn't asleep :::P.

oh

right

Crowbro apparently had forgotten about that little fact about Mindfang's powers. As he realized this, he felt embarrassment about forgetting something that important and his blade lowered an inch or two. Mindfang was quick to exploit this weakness.

Speaking of whiiiiiiich...

Her hands shot to her forehead and she wore a wicked grin on her face. Before Crowbro could react, his world went black.

"Egbertman vs. Feferi Peixes, Part 2" by Redikalus

When Crowbro woke up, he felt chains wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He was captured. Shit. Curiously, his costume was still on, despite the excellent opportunity to unmask him.

Riiiiiiiise and shiiiiiiiine crow8boy.

Crowbro opened his eyes and looked up to see Mindfang and at least a half dozen of her pirates standing in front of him wearing maniacal grins.

you viilains are always so stupid in the same damn way

you have the masked hero tied up and then you don't try to fucking unmask him until hes awake

Ahahahahahahaha!!!!!!! XXXXD

It's 8ecause I wanted to see the look on your face when I unmaaaaaaaasked you!

yeah

but youve given me a chance to fucking escape

and prevent you from learning my secret

Even you can't escape this Crow8oy. I've made sure of it!

dumbass

did you really think that with two of the biggest names in Alternia City going at it that i would be the only person to investigate

What?

Before Crowbro could answer there was a great green burst and young woman garbed in green robes and a pointed hat suddenly appeared before Crowbro and Mindfang.

Sp8ce L8ss?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

hi d- er, crowbrow! :D

it looks like you could use some help!

talk later

escape now

oh, right!

and away we go!

Space Lass waved a strange subject that seemed to be shaped like a dog's head before her and Crowbro and they both disappeared in another bright green burst.

D8mn iiiiiiiittttttt!!!!!!! DXXXX

Officers Zahark, Pyrope, and Captor were congregating in AR's office. AR had just brought them all up to speed on the current disaster. Officer Zahark was beginning to sweat and Officer Captor was fidgeting uncomfortably. Officer Pyrope broke the silence.

W3 OB1OUSLY H4V3 TO T4K3 TH3M BOTH DOWN.

whoa there, ii2nt that two har2h

ii mean

only one ii2 at fault right

D--> We also musn't ignore Ms. Peixes e%alted blood, it would be unthinkable to harm her.

G33Z YOU TWO

I W4S JUST K1DD1NG >:P

OB1OUSLY 1T 1S TH3 WORK OF M1NDF4NG

good thinking

but no

They all had been preoccupied reacting to Officer Pyrope to notice that Crowbro had snuck in the room through the window. AR reacted first.

"Crowbro! This is police business! Out of my office! NOW!"

no

its not police business

AR stood up, enraged, and marched over to Crowboy and tried as best he could to get in his face.

"You are crossing a line. Your vigilantism is against the law! I should be arresting you right now!"

yeah no

listen

feferi is probably being controlled

think about it

why control feferi and not someone else

There was silence for a moment and then Officer Zahark responded

D--> To embarrass and offend her noble status.

exactly

a fucking smear campaign

looks like you cops have brains after all

and the reason to attack egbertman is to create a mess so big that the cops have to get involved on a large scale

Officer Pyrope blurted out: 4 D1STR4CT1ON!

yeah

someone wants the police to lighten up on them

AR returned to his desk and sat back down

"Hmmph. You said it wasn't Mindfang? Why not?"

cause she needs to concentrate to pull shit like this

and ive already broken her concentration enough to know its not her

Now it was Officer Captor's turn to get in Crowbro's face.

what do we do now then, wii2e guy

let me handle this shit

ive already got space lass containing them to the bay

no more precious citizens getting hurt
keep yourselves aimed at real criminals
AR sighed.

"The media is going to fry us over this."
just tell em that feferi was mindcontrolled
"And if she wasn't?"

tell em anyway
wv is the best mayor this city has had in decades
we cant let his reputation be ruined

AR was becoming enraged again.
"You would have me lie? So blantly?!"
to protect the few good things this city has
hell yes

sacrificing yourself for the greater good
i thought thats what being a policeman was about

And with that Crowbro left, jumping off of the windowsill onto a nearby tower and leaving a single black feather behind.

Crowbro lept from rooftop to rooftop until he had reached the highest point in the area and perched himself on the highest point. He opened up his communications line with S.E.E.R.

rose
please tell me you fucking have something
the cops are getting involved

I believe I do Dave.

It seems that Ms. Peixes shares the blood of the Old One that died in the bay years back.

I did some digging and have found something startling; the blood Ms. Peixes shares with the Old Ones has a very similar ectoresonance to that of the subjects of demonology.

wow

i would have never guessed that those creepy ass monsters were similar to demons
great find rose

Well, the similarity is close enough that a sufficiently talented wielder of black magic, someone even farther in the arts than I, could affect the Old One, and thus could affect Ms. Peixes.

And the strongest investment in black magic in the city is...

kingpins mob

Crowbro was now hopping from factory to factory. Fortunately Rose had given him a device to locate the origin of the magic. Unfortunately it was in a highly populated area so Crowbro couldn't simply blow the area sky high like he wanted to. That was okay though, he was up for cutting down some criminals in person.

He managed to reach the target location as the sun was nearing its apex. After some quick scouting he confirmed his suspicions: very well guarded. Outside alone there were nine thugs and four hired muscle. Crowbro smirked, he loved a challenge.

The two thugs patrolling the roof went down first, decapitation before they could even react. The hired thug stationed with them managed to pull out his tommy-gun before he was disarmed, literally. After another decapitation, Crowbro snuck over to the roof access door and knocked. No answer. He swung the door open while standing to the side and two more hired thugs burst out. Before they could turn around and see him, Crowbro slipped inside, closed the door and then barred it shut. He let out a small chuckle, he had done that a hundred times and it still hadn't gotten old.

As Crowbro descended through the building, he systematically slew anyone who could be remotely tied to Kingpin. By the time his locator told him that the next room held the source, he was covered in blood, but none of it his own. At this point, they must be aware that someone was here. No point in being subtle now.

Crowbro dragged his most recent victim up to the door, kicked it in, threw the corpse inside as hard as he could and immediately moved like a flash of lightning to the other side of the room. His little stunt with the corpse shocked most of the inhabitants and gave him a quick scan of the room. It was two floored, with him on the top floor overlooking a mass of thugs and cultists around a spell ring. What was most shocking was the two figures overlooking the ritual. They were Kingpin himself and a small troll with unusually large horns and wearing a top hat. Neither of them were shocked the corpse and both were staring directly at him. Shit.

Kingpin immediately yelled out, ordering all occupants to fire upon Crowbro. That really didn't bother him, but the troll's reaction? The small troll had just smiled, calmly and wickedly. He didn't want to admit it, but the smile sent chills down his back.

Before the thugs and cultists could respond, he jumped from his blown hiding place and landed in middle of the circle. Some of the thugs stupidly opened fire, killing some of their allies as Crowbro ducked out of the way and proceeded to cut them down.

After a full minute of slaughter, Crowbro was standing in a ring of corpses. In the chaos Kingpin and the creepy troll managed to escape. He destroyed the spell circle with a device given by Rose. After he had gotten as much blood off of himself as he could and left the scene he opened up communications.

the spell is down

and the mob is a lot fucking smaller

I figured so; Space Lass just reported that Feferi had fainted.

yeah cool

but

theres something about this whole thing that creeped me out

Creeped you out? I didn't know that was possible.

just

lets talk about it later

okay

Feferi Peixes was returned to Mayor WV's manor an hour later. The mayor was in a state of panic but Egbertman calmed him down and told him that what happened was no big deal to him and that he wasn't angry. When Feferi woke up she didn't have a single memory of the whole thing.

The media was on fire over the whole ordeal and Mayor WV came under fire.

Explanations were given about mind control and gangster manipulation and evidence was shown. Soon all but the staunchest critics backed off of the mayor's case and his reputation managed to emerge more or less unscathed.

Things at S.E.E.R., however, were not going so well. Rose and Dave, with the presence of the troll at the ritual, were piecing together something far more sinister and both we beginning to feel uneasy about this new threat: Mr. Pupa.

"The Case of the Missing Licorice, Part 1" by Aslandus

Eridan looked around his office. Next to the rotary-dial telephone is his gun. That is a lie, Eridan don't have a gun. The phone starts ringing, and he answers it, ready to talk down the hysterical dame on the other end of the line. He puts on his hard-boiledest voice.

Wwhat can I do for ya toots?

Detective Amp0ra, y0u have been c0mmissi0ned t0 investigate a recent swathe 0f crimes.

Wwait, wwhat? Wwhy are you calling me?

(automated response initiated) You have been commissioned, you are on our mailing list for investigators and your performance on this assignment may be used to decide whether you shall be contacted for further cases in the future. Should you require information about your assignment or wish to opt out of the mailing list, please contact the Commissioner. (automated response end)

Wwhat wwas that?

Dammit, I th0ught I t0ld Officer Zahhak t0 rem0ve that functi0n... It's an aut0mated resp0nse, is it really t00 c0mplicated f0r y0u? By the way, even if y0u Opt Out Of the mailing list, y0u still have t0 d0 this assignment.

(sigh) Understood.

Ampora hung up the phone. That mailing list, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Ordinarily, Ampora would turn his back on the snide officers (they kept calling him "detective," which only rubbed in the fact that he never actually made detective when he was in the ACPD, so as soon as he started working freelance, suddenly they all decided to call him "detective"), and they always gave him really unflattering jobs... Still, it had been months since his last case, so Ampora couldn't exactly turn down a paycheck...

PI Ampora drove to the ACPD headquarters from his office. Well, they're in the same building, so he actually just put on his hat and sat in his dented up car for about two minutes, then walked up to the Commissioner's office. The Commissioner isn't in his office right now, but that won't stop Eridan Ampora from walking in. The Commissioner's jar of cookies is sitting on the desk. Maybe just one...

Eridan plucks a cookie out of the jar and puts it in his mouth. And promptly realizes he has the barrel of a rifle in his maw.

I kn0w things have been sl0w in the investigation business lately, but that may be a little extreme... The C0mmissi0ner will be here sh0rtly

Officer Megido walks off down the hallway, presumably to pester someone else. Eridan

pulls the gun out of his mouth, and with a flick of his wrist turns it back into a cookie. Armstrong's footsteps echo down the hall, so Eridan stows the cookie in his hat before he arrives. Commissioner AR enters the room.

So wwhat's the mystery you need the great Invvestigator Ampora to solve?

AR tells Eridan that there was a recent swathe of disappearances among local candy stores. All the black and red licorice has gone missing! No other candy, just the licorice. It's suspected that it has to do with Mr. Pupa, but that doesn't say much considering he's always the first suspect, no matter how minor or random the crime.

So wwill I have tools for this case or wwill I havve to invvestigate with only my fedora?

AR tries to sell Eridan on something about how a professional should always be prepared... which basically means, "nope, sucks to be you!" Maybe he'll just hold onto that rifle for awhile... Eridan is dismissed from the office.

If he's going to go investigating, Eridan is going to need to pick up his trench coat from Kanaya. He gave it to her to repair a few weeks ago after it got riddled with bullet holes (in hindsight, that case could've gone better), hopefully she found the time between the atrocious numbers of injured officers she sees daily. Ampora walks into Nurse Maryam's office, she is sitting around sipping red wine out of a half-empty blood bag and doesn't seem overly concerned about your presence.

Hey Kanaya, did you get fix the coat I dropped off a wwhile ago?

Hmm? Coat... Coat... Oh Yes, I Fixed The Overcoat, Then Got Bored And Made A Few Modifications.

Modifications? It doesn't seem much different to me

I May Or May Not Have Sewn The Fabric Of Reality Into The Pockets... And I Trimmed A Little Off The Bottom

Wwhat? Howw can I look badass wwith only a moderately long coat?

It Was Dragging On The Ground When You Walked, It Was Practically Abusive Not To Shorten It.

Kanaya waves you away while she finishes off her wine. You are now properly dressed to face the mysteries of Alternia City... Now then, where to start?

"The Case of the Missing Licorice, Part 2" by Aslandus

Investigator Eridan Ampora has just received his mission: to find the cause behind the recent rash of disappearances of candy in Alternia City. To begin... well, the police archive would probably be a good place. Ampora walked to the archive office, where Officer Serket and Officer Pyrope are playing cards.

8ce of clubs! You can't beat the 8ce!

Oh no? Two of sp4d3s!

Two doesn't beat an 8ce! It doesn't beat anything!

1t do3s wh3n you pl4y w4r, or d1d you forg3t?

F8ck! This sucks! I'll never win at this r8!

Card count1ng 1s 4 p3rf3ctly l3g1t1m4t3 w4y to pl4y! You'd not1c3 1f 1 look3d 4t your c4rds, your h4nds would b3 cov3r3d 1n sp1t...

It's a game based entirely on luck! 8nd we only have seven cards, we have three cards each! There is one card not in either of our hands because we have an odd number of cards! We can't even pl8y a full g8me!

Oi! Officer Serket, I need to get into the archivve to find out more about the case I'm on, can I get access?

Get us a new deck of cards and I'll let you in

That's bullshit Vvriska, your job literally consists of nothing besides letting invvestigators like me into the archivve

True, 8nd as a result I get rather 8ORED sitting around doing nothing, so unless you can fetch me something to do while I sit around, I'll continue to exercise my right to NOT let you in, detective.

6 of clubs

6 of diamonds, war

Ace of clubs

F8ck!

Fine, I'll be back in a bit

Eridan leaves the two to their game. Where to get a deck of cards? He could try the game shop down the street, if he had enough COMMON SENSE or MONEY... two things he has been lacking in lately. Perhaps his buddy Officer Captor could help.

Hey Sollux, could I borroww a-

No

Well, it was worth a try. Maybe there's a deck of cards in the lost and found building. On the other side of town. Dammit.

Eridan Ampora: Ace Investigator is on the case, he climbs on top of a nearby bus and surfs it across town (he has a car, but no gas, the things you've gotta do to save a buck

in this town). The Investigator arrives at the odds and ends repository, referred to by some as the "lost and found building," and by others as the junkyard. The main building is the office, with a large land space around it littered with categorized junk. Ampora looks through the records in the head office, finding the normal stocks of broken machinery and empty gun cartridges that were almost constant in Alternia City's dump. He finds a section for games and tracks down the cards.

And the deck of cards is right at the bottom of the pile. This is gonna suck...

Eridan reaches out and pulls the deck of cards out, and the tower of toys and board games topples over onto him.

Back at the ACPD station, Round 413 of War is about to begin between Terezi and Vriska. After 412 consecutive losses, Vriska is getting ready to quit. The door swings open and Investigator Ampora steps in, a brightly colored throwing disk balanced on his hat, a pawn stuck in his ear and a purple scalemate plush clinging to his arm. He silently hands Vriska the deck of cards and walks into the archive as she presses the button on the console to open the door, only stumbling momentarily when Terezi snatches the scalemate plush off his arm.

Oh, we don't need these 7 cards anymore, toss them out for me would ya? I'd keep them myself if there were 8, but it's not worthwhile with only 7.

Eridan Ampora loses 1 deck of cards. Eridan loses 1 scalemate plushie. Eridan acquires 7 playing cards. Quest completed: +100 sleuthing... Level up! Eridan Ampora leaves the lowly level of secondhand pet detective to ascend to the new height of Sherlock Caligula. Nothing can stop his progress now!

Using his SLEUTHING SKILLS, Eridan discovers the missing candy has only occurred in areas coinciding with recent activity from the Midnight Crew. He also realizes that their leaders have sweet tooth (no, not sweet teeth, that sounds dumb) almost as large as their violent tendencies and criminal records. The lack of witnesses would likely be attributed to their take-no-prisoners approach to robbery and they are notorious for leaving crime scenes spotless of actual evidence. Great, the biggest lead is toward a gang that can't be convicted due to lack of evidence and can't be arrested because they kill police officers like insects... That said, nobody's ever needed evidence to bring justice in Alternia City (especially if Officer Pyrope is on the case) and Eridan Ampora is not a police officer.

"The Case of the Missing Licorice, Part 3" by Aslandus

Looking back, perhaps this plan could've gone better...

Eridan figured out where the next theft would take place, and showed up to stop it in the action. He didn't predict both Hearts Boxcars and Diamonds Droog being present. He also didn't predict that they were tough enough to take a few rounds from his rifle with barely a flinch. Now Investigator Eridan Ampora is trapped in a cell in the Midnight Crew's base, his rifle and brightly colored plastic throwing disk have been taken, but he managed to hide the seven playing cards and pawn from Boxcars' shakedown. The guard's desk is unattended. What should Eridan do next?

Eridan: use the Ace of Clubs

Whoa, careful there gun-jumper, we don't want to waste the best card in your hand on the first move.

Eridan: use the pawn

Not sure how to... wait, maybe if we... yes, indeed...

Eridan uses OBJECT DUALITY to turn the pawn into... a White Carapacian? Well, he... or she, it's hard to tell... is grateful for not being stuck as an immobile object anymore, and grabs the key off the desk and opens the cage.

Eridan: Turn your new friend back into a pawn and carry him in your pocket for the rest of the adventure

Eridan attempts to grab the carapacian to turn him back into a game piece, but the carapacian runs off before he can. What now?

Carapacian: Call guards on Eridan

In a fit of madness the carapacian alerts the guards to Eridan's presence, which naturally does nothing because the Midnight Crew are notorious for their lack of personnel. The carapacian absconds from the area as quickly as possible. Eridan is now standing in a room filled with crates of licorice.

Eridan: Use the 6 of Clubs

Eridan pulls out the small wooden club out of his sleeve. The boxes don't seem especially impressed.

Eridan: use the 6 of Diamonds, dual wield the sixes

Eridan draws the jeweled knife out of his other sleeve. With a weapon in each hand, his damage output is twice what it was before. The boxes still don't look impressed.

Eridan: Fuck it, Choppy-slicey murder time!

It's Choppy-Slicey Murder time! (whoop whoop whoop whoop) wait, no, peanut butter jelly time parody will have to be delayed. Eridan dives into battle against the 9 boxes closest to him, five of them are broken with the first leap. All this ruckus may draw some unwanted attention, but too late now. Black licorice is all over the floor. There are now 4 crates left.

Eridan: Were you told to stop? More of the choppy slicey!

The flap of one of the boxes touches the club's handle, Eridan uses the knife to stab the box right in its barcode. The knife gets stuck in the wood. Eridan crushes another box with the club, getting licorice on his hands. Unfortunately, after breaking all these boxes, Eridan doesn't have the energy to keep swinging this club like a lunatic.

Eridan: beat a hasty retreat

Eridan flees the battle like a sissy little guppy. He will probably lose a lot of street cred for this, but those boxes are too hardcore for him.

Eridan: Use the Jack of Hearts

May as well, it couldn't make things much worse... It turns into a pony with a heart on its rump. How cute. It shall be called Maplehoof and it will be your best friend forever.

Eridan: Ride into the night on Maplehoof

Eridan climbs onto the pony's back and rides it toward what looks like an exit to the prison, which is actually an abandoned warehouse. Unfortunately, Eridan gets pulled off the pony by Hearts Boxcars, and Maplehoof runs off into the night. Oh shit.

"The Case of the Missing Licorice, Part 4" by Aslandus

Private Investigator Eridan Ampora is staring in the face of Hearts Boxcars, the big guy among the Midnight Crew. Luckily, Boxcars is alone, however Eridan is exhausted and has only a few cards left. What should he do

Eridan: Use the Queen of Diamonds

Well, if there was a time for it, it's now! Eridan uses the Queen of Diamonds... And it turns into an Aradiabot.

Eridan, yOu shOuld really be l00king int0 wh0's been turning people and animals into Objects rather than the theft Of s0me fucking candy, what kind Of detective are yOu?

I'm a Privvate Invvestigator! And a little too busy to talk right noww!

Oh calm d0wn, B0xcars l00ks big, but he's actually the push0ver Of the Midnight Crew Wwell, a little help anywway?

Fine, but yOu're On yOur Own after this

The aradiabot uses telekinesis to throw Boxcars, who has been allowing Ampora and Megido to banter while he holds Eridan by the trenchcoat, into a stack of boxes. Then she flies off out of the warehouse. HB is getting up and looks rather angry. Luckily, Eridan escapes before he drags himself out of the boxes. Back into the warehouse, through the hallways in the back, Eridan passes an office with a cookie, a couple of licorice scotty dogs, and a brightly colored throwing disk on the desk.

Well, no harm in taking a bite right? Eridan picks up the cookie and puts it in his... dammit, not again! Eridan pulls the rifle barrel out of his mouth, flips it back into a cookie, and hides it under his hat. He stuffs the disk and candies into his pockets. Whoops, he filled up all his inventory slots because the scotty dogs were not in a package. The sound of footsteps approaches from down the hall.

He runs into Diamonds Droog and Spades Slick. What should Investigator Ampora do?

Eridan: USE THE ACE OF CLUBS ALREADY!!!

Eridan uses his last decent card to... Oh fuck, the Ace of Clubs is Clubs Deuce. CD falls to the ground and bonks his head because he can't fly and isn't tall enough to reach the floor from where the card was being held.

Eridan: RUN FOR THE HILLS!!!

Fuck this shit! Eridan bolts past Droog as he moves to help Deuce recover from his fall. Slick chases Eridan down the hall. Eridan leaves the back door of the warehouse, with Slick in hot pursuit.

Eridan: There's only one of them now! Stand and fight like a true problem sleuth!

Eridan can't hear you, he's too busy fleeing. He runs across the parking lot, toward the 5 Aces Casino, founded and held by the Midnight Crew, it's notorious for cheating customers, but they still get business... an unsettlingly large amount considering their reputation.

Eridan bashes the door in with his shoulder and runs through the building toward the exit, but at this hour the place is bustling. The crowd of people is too thick to push through, so Eridan cuts through a back room and up some stairs.

Now that he can catch his breathe a little, Eridan looks around, and notices cages with citizens and animals in them, as well as crates of weapons, and what looks like a giant printing press with shackles on the conveyor belt. There are also numerous boxes of knick knacks, cards, and toys... The implications of this are unsettling, but confusing, why would the Midnight Crew be turning people into items rather than just killing them? No time to think it over though, Slick just burst through the door and he looks pissed. Any advice?

Eridan: Use the two

Might as well try, can't hurt at this point. Eridan uses the two and it changes into... a plush toy of a scotty dog. Well, at least he tried.

What? Slick is entranced by the small plush toy, and follows Eridan as he carries it as if being led on a leash. Eridan slips out of the window, scotty and Slick in tow. The rest of the Midnight Crew is entering the building just below. Eridan manages to get down without making noise, but Slick tumbles down like a bag of starch tubers. Someone hears the ruckus, and Eridan runs for the ACPD headquarters, in the hope that the Midnight Crew won't follow. They do.

Eridan pulls out his rifle and shoots at their feet, hoping it might throw them off, and it does. Apparently their carapaces can absorb gunfire, but they aren't steady enough runners to avoid being knocked down by being shot in the feet. Diamonds Droog and Hearts Boxcars fall over, and Clubs Deuce seems to have wandered off. Slick avoids falling, evading all the gunfire even out of his right mind.

An ACPD patrol car is in sight, and Eridan runs for it, then there is an explosion and the car smashes into Eridan's chest, knocking him senseless. Clubs Deuce pulls out his cane and does a dance on top of the wreckage.

Eridan is having trouble breathing, and is even more exhausted from running, and Slick is still mesmerized by the dog plush. Desperation time.

Eridan heaves the brightly colored disk at Deuce, knocking the happy little Carapacian off his mount. Another patrol car comes around the corner, and Clubs Deuce cuts his losses and runs into the nearby alleyway.

Driving the patrol car is Officer Pyrope, who is hanging her tongue out the window, and on top of the car is Officer Captor, still looking terrified from Pyrope's driving. They stop and pick up Eridan and his prisoner, then bring them both back to the ACPD.

"Blinded by Time" by Wigmund

Terezi Pyrope was laying down on a bench in one of the many parks that made up a green barrier between the upperclass portions of town and the lower-class wards of The Narrows and The Settlements. They were really quite lovely if you didn't think about the reason they were built. She always loved sitting just in the right area so she could contrast the sharp smells of all the glass and steel from the skyscrapers, the somewhat natural greenery of the parklands and the well-lived and sometimes unidentifiable odors drifting from where people actually lived. It was a masterpiece that only she could perceive.

While she was basking in the glory of Alternia City, something else caught her nose. She sniffed and figured it was coming from a most-definitely-not-suspicious man that was walking by her. She put on her broad smile and sat up.

"Hmmm...You know 1 lov3 ch3rr13s."

The stranger stopped in front of her and probably smiled, but his mustache and impressive beard hid his mouth. He sat down next to Terezi and pulled out a package of bird seed.

"Whatever could you be talking about Detective?"

"My, my, how 3v3r d1d you d1scov3r my s3cr3t? 1 w4s so w3ll d1sgu1s3d."

"Just taking off your police garb and wearing street clothes isn't a disguise. Despite the fact that no one has ever seen the master investigator of the APD out her uniform."

"Th4t's not tru3. Th3r3's 4t l34st on3 p3rson th4t h4s."

Terezi turned her head away from the bearded man feeding the pigeons.

"4nd 1 wou1d l1k3 1t 1f h3 wou1d stop by my pl4c3 ton1ght."

The man stopped feeding the pigeons and looked up towards the Mayor's Tower.

"What...oh...uh...yeah, I think he would like that as well."

He got up and raised his hat to Terezi and walked off. She watched in her own way his departure and sighed. Now she needed to get home and clean her filthy apartment up. Her guest wouldn't like wading through piles of cheap Prospitan take-out stir fry containers.

That night, Terezi rested after a busy day of trying to make a dent in the mess. She eventually got the worst of it cleaned away...she was going to miss those smells...and pushed the rest into a couple of closets to be dealt with 'later'.

She got up when she heard a knock at her window that faced one of the unknown number of darkened alleyways of The Narrows. She smiled, the last person who did that found himself on an express trip back down to the ground far below, but this one was expected. It was the only safe way they could meet up.

Terezi and her guest embraced for several minutes. They relished these fleeting moments. Separated by the worlds they lived in, but they still sought out each other.

Terezi pulled Dave over to the couch and brought out a couple of drinks. Dave took one and handed Terezi a gift.

A box of chocolate-covered cherries.

Expensive ones.

The ones she loved so much.

"H3H3H3H3H3

D4v3, you br1b3ry of 4 pol1c3 off1c3r 1s t3rr1bly 1l3g4l. Th1nk 4bout th3 f1t Comm1s1on3r 4R would p1tch 1f h3 found out."

Dave pulled Terezi down next to himself on the couch and held her. He sank his face into her dark hair, taking care not to poke himself on those horns.

"Your commisioner can live with it. Besides, if he hasn't figured out what's been going on between us by now - I'm not too worried."

Dave took a good look at Terezi's face and noticed something was wrong.

"Oh come on, I didn't mean it. He's doing a decent job with what he's been-"

Terezi hushed him and sighed.

"1t's not th4t...1t's just th4t..."

"What?"

"W3 found on3 of your t1m3 clon3s...h3 w4s d34d...1t look3d l1k3 th3 M1dn1ght Cr3w got 4hold of h1m..."

Dave leaned back, slightly surprised by this. He knew he lost one of his many doomed time clones recently. He usually made sure his other clones retrieved the body before anyone found the corpse, but sometimes shit like this happened.

"I'm sorry about that Terezi, but I'm still here."

Terezi wiped a tear away from underneath her red shades.

"1 know...1 know...1t's just th4t 3v3ry t1m3 w3 f1nd on3 of your clon3s..."

1'm 4lw4ys worr13d th4t th1s t1m3 1t won't b3 4 clon3, but 1t w1ll b3 you."

She hugged him tightly as he rubbed her back.

"D4ve...1 don't know wh4t 1 would do 1f 1 lost you..."

1 c4n't los3 you..."

"I'm sorry Terezi. I'm sorry I put you through this.

I wish I didn't..."

He propped up the crying troll and looked directly into her shades.

"I wish I could take back everything I've done to keep you from being hurt.

It hurts me far more than anything else to see you cry."

She sniffed loudly and pulled in the don of the Strider Mafia and Crowbro in close and kissed him.

"4nd 1 now th4t. But r1ght now w3'v3 got th3 n1ght w1th 34ch oth3r."

Dave smiled at her as he turned off the lights.

"Let's enjoy it."

"Dr. Nitram and Mr. Pupa" by Aslandus

You are Tavros Nitram...

Not that remembering your name is too much of a feat, but these days it's good to remind yourself. You keep receiving phone calls asking for-

phone rings

hELLO?

H3Y N1TR4M, OR SHOULD I S4Y, PUP4?

She immediately hangs up, you keep receiving these weird phone calls asking for Mr. Pupa, you know all the people who live in this house, you even gave names to most of the consorts who maintain the place, and there is no Mr. Pupa. It stopped bothering you a while ago, even if Officer Pyrope does freak you out with her throaty voice and insistence on calling you Mr. Pupa. There's actually not many people living in Nitram manor at all, in fact, it was quite lonely here for a few years after the accident. You begin recalling the accident, the bodies, the blood (oh gog, the blood). It happened a few years after you graduated Alternia University with your doctorate, as the youngest of your class. You don't remember precisely what happened during the accident, but you blacked out when you stood on your mechanical legs and when you came to your entire family was dead and you were sitting in your wheelchair at the side of the room. You told as much to the police, they said everyone had been impaled with a long, round spike device. It just so happens that the heirloom family lance was covered in blood, though it could have been that it was lying in a pool of blood. The police decided little Tavros Nitram, though traumatized, was not guilty, a highly unusual ruling for Alternian courts, where they would throw you in jail for being accused of stealing 11 cents from a vending machine...

You had made a few changes since that day, you never stood up on purpose for fear of blacking out again (though accidents did happen, you would always wake up in your bed or on a chair and call a consort to bring your wheelchair). You kept the consorts on constant watch, so if the rogue who murdered your family ever came back, he would know who they were. You keep a retractable lance in the back of your wheelchair, in case the rogue decides to "finish the set." You also didn't find much joy in people anymore, knowing they could be so quickly taken away. You also had Officer Serket, one of the ACPD's most "trusted" officers come visit you from time to time to check up and see if the cold case the accident had become had any more evidence. You didn't particularly like the officer, and she occasionally would throw you out of your wheelchair for no apparent reason. Sometimes you fell flat on your face and she laughed as though she had just told the best joke, sometimes you stumbled onto your mechanical legs and blacked out...

The mechanical legs had been necessary at the time, there weren't many careers that

could be done without walking and his family had many staircases, it just seemed like a good investment. The legs worked perfectly fine, mechanically, but something went wrong with the installation. During testing, they reported "Sociopathic tendencies and Antisocial behavior" as abnormalities with the installation, but they let you leave. If you ever become mayor, healthcare is the first thing you'll rework. However, this talk of mechanical legs brings up another thing, Alternia University and your old friends.

Equius Zahhak had graduated a year before you, with a degree in Biorobotics. From what you heard he rose to head surgeon quickly, but you never checked any hospital staffing forms yourself. He had been slow to warm up to you, having grown up being taught that nobility were "his people," royalty was "above him," and anyone else was inferior... But he was a good friend once you got to know him. There was also Sollux, who was exceptional at programming, some teachers even accused him of hacking into the school database and changing his grades (he didn't, as far as you know). You had gotten a surgical degree, and your skills were exceptional, but you couldn't get a job without being able to quickly respond, and blacking out while running to perform surgery would be considered less than ideal. It meant you had to spend most of your life living off your family's fortune... To be honest, there were worst ways to live-

:33<*Karkat wants to know if Mr. Pupurr has a job for us to do*

nEPETA, pLEASE CALL ME TAVROS, mR PUPA SOUNDS SO RIDICULOUS

That much was true, "Pupa" had always seemed like an odd name, and you had worked hard for your doctorate, if you were going to have a title, you would at least have people acknowledge it. His apparel apparently included a top hat and monocle, which sounded extremely garish (granted, you had considered wearing a top hat at one point, but mostly because it's the only head wear that would fit with your giant horns, you decided against it).

:33<Okay! Can I bring another kitty in here? There's so many out there to save!

sURE, jUST TAKE CARE OF IT YOURSELF, aND DON'T SCARE THE CONSORTS

You had learned it didn't matter whether you said she was allowed to or not, she would bring them in, she would just try to hide them if you refused. Nepeta was one of the new housemates you had recently acquired, Karkat, Nepeta, and Gamzee. You don't remember them getting here, but they live here now, and you don't really want to tell them to leave. As you said, it gets lonely in this mansion alone. Karkat seemed easily irritable at first, but he seemed to warm up to you after a week or so. Nepeta trusted you almost instantly, but from Karkat's reaction, that is very common. Gamzee is a bit out there, but you keep him supplied with Sopor slime, if only to keep him from siphoning it out of his recuperation. From his ramblings bad things happen if he doesn't get his slime, but you're happy to oblige one of the cheapest drugs in the city (not exactly a big demand for something that shuts down your brain like a baseball bat to the skull). They occasionally came back injured from whatever they had been doing

that night, and suddenly your surgical skill was very valuable for your housemates.

At times, you are tempted to stand, just to get a look at yourself standing tall and mightily, but then-

Now, Who's that nefarious criminal mastermind in the mirror? heheheh. All that's missing...

Mr. Pupa pulls the folding top hat and monocle out of his desk, donning them, and strolls out the door. There was a city to be conquered.

"The Raid" by Wigmund

Karkat and his gang silently made their way through the labyrinthine underground sewers, subway tunnels and other forgotten structures that twisted and tangled underneath Alternia City like a mass of worms.

Nepeta frowned in disgust as they passed a vast cavern filled with what looked like something that should be pumped to the treatment plant, but found a much cheaper place to be stored.

Gamzee was his usual blissfully unaware self. Karkat wondered whether the druggie even had a sense of smell.

"Xpp < *Nepeta wants to know why Karkitty is l33ding her and Gamz33 so d33p into the sewers. She is frightened and she makes it known that it stinks down here*"

Karkat directed his dim flashlight at Nepeta and glared at her.

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT THAT FUCKING ROLE PLAYING BULLSHIT?"

Nepeta hid behind Gamzee who teetered and tottered around.

"Uh, YeAh BrO. I'm CuRiOuS wHy We'Re DoWn HeRe As WeLl. WhAt ThE fUcK aRe We Up To?"

":?? < Yeah, why did Mr. Pupurr send us down here? Why are we heading towards Fort Skaian?"

"HoNk!!!!!"

Karkat wiped a hand down his face in frustration. Of course Nepeta would figure out where they were heading, she always had a great sense of direction and location down here. Despite the fact she couldn't find her way out of a paper bag, she could tell you exactly where you were in the city and in which direction you were heading even while blindfolded. And since she just sent Gamzee into a panic by mentioning their destination, he figured he was obligated to tell them what was up.

"Mr. Pupa wants us to snag something from Fort Skaian's R&D department. He didn't tell me exactly what it was, he just said that I'd know it when I saw it."

"BuT wHy FuCkInG uS?"

Gamzee gripped his horns as he continued to dance around and honk in distress.

"WhY aRe We FuCkInG wItH tHe MoThErFuCkInG mIlItArY?"

ThEy ArEn'T tHe FuCkInG fUzZ bRo! ThEy'Ll JuSt FuCkInG ShOoT uS aNd LeAvE oUr

BoDiEs FoR tHe ImPs AnD cOnSoRtS!"

Now this made Nepeta freak out.

"DD: < What? What do you m33n 'just shoot us' Gamz33?

:((< I don't like it down here Karkitty. Let's go back!"

Karkat sighed and tried to calm them down.

"We can't turn back, this is one of Mr. Pupa's IMPORTANT FUCKING JOBS. If we don't do this, we better hope the military find us first."

His partners in crime stared at him in absolute terror. He gave them a malicious grin as he continued.

"But the boss did say that he left something down here that would make our way into the base much easier. I'm just trying to find it."

He looked at his friends and nodded back into the darkness ahead of them.

"Come on guys. Let's keep going."

Gamzee and Nepeta watched Karkat walk on. They then gave each other fearful looks and set off after him, moaning in fear all the way.

As they made their way into the sewers underneath Fort Skaian, they were nearly found by several patrols. Nearly found, but never discovered. The Karkat Gang got to watch in terror as the heavily armored patrols passed them by. The fucking looked like something from a Sci-Fi Horror flick, and they were armed for the roles as well.

What was the military afraid of down here that would prompt them to travel around like that?

Eventually, Karkat noticed a hole in the sewer's wall that lead into a small room. Inside that room was the ✂ that Mr. Pupa used.

Karkat had Nepeta squeeze inside to retrieve the goods. After a moment, she pushed through two military uniforms with proper id tags.

"Hey, shouldn't there be three of these?"

":33 < There are.

B|| < But do you think I'm going to change in front of you two?"

"Fine then.

Hey Gamzee, let's get changed."

Gamzee picked up the uniform and looked at it distastefully. He then gave Karkat a worried look. He knew what else he was going to have to do.

"Yes you stupid fuck. You're gonna have to remove your makeup.

The military doesn't deal with stupid clown-worshipping bullshit."

"Oh FuCk WoRkInG fOr ThE mAn. ThIs Is FuCkInG bUlLsHiT."

Karkat grinned grimly as he put on the uniform.

"You're telling me..."

After a minute or two, Nepeta squeezed out of the hole again, this time in the military uniform which she somehow managed to keep clean despite squirming her way through a filth covered hole. Karkat raised his eyebrows as he looked upon the catgirl who for the first time he met her, wasn't wearing the blue fur cap, massively oversized jacket or grimy sweats and t-shirt. She looked good. He coughed and tried to distract himself from that thought.

Eventually the three found their way up onto Fort Skaian, yet again avoiding anything that would have blown their cover. Karkat pulled the others into a darkened hangar and retrieved a crude map of the base from his pocket. He got his bearings and found where they would be on it.

"Alright, we're here by the airstrip's hangars. We need to get to the - FUCKING HELL - opposite side of the base to reach the R&D facility."

He kicked something in frustration and put away the map.

"Let's head out. The sooner we get whatever the fuck Pupa sent us for, the sooner we can head back home."

They made their way across Fort Skaian. All the way somehow avoiding detection. In fact, it seemed that the soldiers on the base went out of their way to avoid them. Several times Karkat noticed their path would take them near a group of soldiers that once they got near them, would suddenly find other places to be.

What the fuck was going on?

It was Nepeta would stumbled across the reason why.

":?? < Karkitty?"

"What?"

":?? < Why are our uniforms diffurent than the other soldiers' unifurms?"

"What the fuck are you talking about. Our uniforms can't be-"

Karkat stopped as he stared at the uniforms they were wearing. It wasn't obvious in the sewers due to it being dark and the fact he had never actually seen a uniform up close, but now out here in the open - he could see that there were quite apparent differences.

He looked closely and wondered where he had seen duds like this before...

...he could have sworn he had...oh shit...

He remember a news broadcast he saw while robbing a department store. Something had happened in the Lost District and the military was sealing yet another portion of the gang's old home off from the media and anyone else that might get curious. But what drew his eyes to the broadcast were the scary fuckers in fancy gear that prowled around behind the talking head and the soldier sent forward with some bullshit excuse. Secretive looking fucks.

And Karkat and his pals were trapizing around the Fort in those very same uniforms.

Oh fuck, Mr. Pupa, what the fuck did you get us into, Karkat thought to himself as he tried very hard to not panic himself.

"Well Nepeta, these must be special uniforms.
Now let's get going. We don't want to keep Mr. Pupa waiting."

They managed to reach the R&D facility without any trouble and thankfully without running across any of those scary fucks.

Karkat was relieved that the id tags they came with the uniforms allowed them into the main R&D building. Now to find whatever the fuck it was that they were looking for.

As they prowled around, avoiding scientists and -oh shit- those scary fucks, they found their way into a large laboratory. This had to be a good place to start looking.

Karkat motioned to his pals that they should keep their eyes open for something when they all heard a clicking noise behind them.

More specifically the clicking noise made by someone chambering a round in a large and very deadly gun.

Specifically a gun that Karkat had only heard about. Something that would prompt Detective Terezi to skip the trial and just string him up from the nearest light post if she ever found Karkat possessing something like it.

"Put your hands up and slowly turn around.
You know I don't like it when you Nightwatch jerks just barge into my lab."

Karkat, Nepeta and Gamzee stuck their hands as high as they could and slowly turned around.

To find a dark-haired woman leveling what was obviously her best friend at them.

Karkat felt something drop in his stomach. Something wonderful.

The woman looked at them intensely down the sights and then cocked an eyebrow in confusion.

"You three are too short, not to mention too young, to be Nightwatch."

Karkat tensed up yet again. He looked out the corner of his eyes and saw that Nepeta was frozen like a preybeast in front of an oncoming truck and that Gamzee was looking straight up at the ceiling, praying.

"Alright, explain yourselves right now or I'll hand you over to Nightwatch who I imagine will be intensely curious as to where you got those uniforms."

Karkat gulped and looked directly into the woman's green eyes.

"Well, since our shit is up. Nothing worse can happen to us.

Mr. Pupa sent us after something here."

"Mr. Pupa? What were you here for?"

"I don't know, the boss said we'd fucking know it when we found it."

The woman lowered the gun and smiled at the three. She seemed to be listening to something because she nodded and would mutter something to herself.

"Oracle, our little retrievers are here.."

"Alright you three, follow me."

Karkat sighed and motioned to the others as they headed deeper into the labs.

Occasionally, the woman would wave something in the air before moving on.

"What's that you're doing?"

"Can't have the security cameras recording me leading you three to what you're looking for."

"Oh."

It wasn't long before the woman indicated that they had found what they were looking for.

"Here it is. This is what Mr. Pupa desires. This is what he was promised."

"Who promised?"

"That's not for you to know."

"Is there anything for me to know?"

The woman smiled at him. Gut confusion erupted again.

"To be honest. Not much."

Karkat tossed the object they retrieved to Gamzee who tucked it away in the amazing mass of hair he had. Then Karkat turned around to face the woman again.

"Well, can I at least get your name?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and smirked.

"Well, I can't deny anything if they catch you, so you might as well know.

I'm Dr. Harley, Dr. Jade Harley."

Jade...her name was Jade...

Karkat motioned for his pals to move on ahead of him while he stayed back to deal with something. It was a useful gesture to have when he needed a lookout whenever he was cracking a safe, now it saved him from some embarrassment in front of Gamzee and Nepeta...especially Nepeta.

"So...uh...Jade..."

"Dr. Harley."

"Yes, Dr. Harley. ummm...do you live on base?"

She was pursed her lips and gave Karkat a cautiously curious glance.

"No, I happen to live off-base.

Why do you ask?"

Karkat blushed furiously as she glared at him.

"Oh. No reason. No reason."

"Better be, because if I see you coming for me to 'keep me quiet' I'm happy to let you know that I carry this weapon with me at all times."

"Oh shit. Don't worry about that.

Uh...I'm sorry that I asked."

Karkat then turned around to join his friends, if he watching Jade, he would have noticed her smile at him.

He started to head out the door when he heard Dr. Harley clear her throat.

"Though I wouldn't mind meeting you somewhere else under better circumstances."

He stopped and smiled to himself before running out.

When he reached Nepeta and Gamzee, he led them out of the base. Once again with no troubles. How fucking curious, but it wasn't something that Karkat wanted to dwell upon.

They handed off the object to Mr. Pupa who seem quite estatic to get the item, whatever the fuck it was. At least he paid them decently this time for the job. They'd be able to get some food and have some money to play around with.

As they left Mr. Pupa's, Nepeta bumped into Karkat to get his attention. He had been distracted since their little raid.

":33 < It looks like I'm going to have to update my shipping wall."

"What the fuck are you talking about you autistic freak?"

";33 < I saw the way you and Ms Scientist Lady were looking at each other."

"SHUT UP."

"Orientation" by Wigmund

Detective Terezi Pyrope strode across the front of the meeting room that housed the latest recruits into the Alternia City Police Department. She strode across the front of the meeting room, stopped in the center and spun to face the crowd that had gathered to watch. Detective Pyrope clutched her cane behind her back and gave her trademarked grin to the entire room. Several of the recruits scooted back in their chairs involuntarily, earning them laughter from the ranking officers and detectives that had gathered to watch her session along with them.

Along with the recruits and herself, she noticed that Officers Captor, Sekret and Megido, the plains-clothes Detective Eridan and Sergeant Zahhak as well as several others were there. She smiled, this was good, no need to have the recruits chase them all down to learn their faces later.

And with that final thought, Terezi steeled herself and began the orientation.

"W3lcom3, r3cru1ts, to th3 gr34t3st pol1c3 d3p4rtm3nt 1n th3 world. You 4ll 4r3 now proud m3mb3rs of th3 4lt3rn14 C1ty Pol1c3 D3p4rtm3nt. Congr4tul4t1ons."

She paced across the front of the hall as she went through the standard spiel about their duties and responsibilities, the standard stock phrases from the HR department, told them about donations to the Widows And Orphans Fund, repeated what they must have heard hundreds of times during training about treating the scum of the city with respect, and so on. Standard stuff, but this wasn't why everyone liked to have Pyrope do orientation, what she went into next.

"4lr1ght, now th4t w3'v3 gott3n through 4ll th4t bor1ng bullsh1t."

This helped the room wake back up and lightened the mood in preparation of what was to come.

"Now, 1'm go1ng to g1v3 you 4ll th3 low-down 4bout th3 sorry fuck1ng st4t3 th3 c1ty 1s 1n 4nd wh4t you 4ll n33d to do to surv1v3 1t 4nd do your jobs w1thout worry1ng 4bout pull1ng from the WOF."

Terezi pulled out a remote and turned on the projectors at the back of the room. Up across the front of the meeting hall, two projections came up with Terezi standing in between them. On the left was a map of the city with the wards shown in a veritable rainbow of colors. At the moment, the right side was blank.

"1 4m now go1ng to show you wh4t you 4r3 f4c1ng out th3r3 b3s1d3s your st4nd4rd

cr1m1n4ls 4nd cr4z3d consorts."

She pushed a button and the blank screen changed to show three individuals.

"F1rst up 1s th3 so-c4ll3d 'K4rk4t G4ng'. Th3y 4r3 l34d by th3 guy 4t th3 front of th1s p1cture, K4rk4t V4nt4s. Th3 oth3r two 4r3 th3 c4tburgl4r, N3p3t4 L31jon, 4nd th3 drugg3d-out clown, G4mz33 M4k4r4. Th3s3 guys 4r3 your st4nd4rd sm4ll g4ng 4nd th3y l1m1t th3ms3lv3s - usu4lly - to p3tty cr1m3s 4nd qu1t3 l1t3r4lly c4tburgl4ry."

The picture changed to show the three running away from Officers Captor and Pyrope. Nepeta was carrying a large sack overflowing with cats. The room broke out in laughter.

"1 w1ll w4rn you r3cru1ts though: B3 C4R3FUL WH3N 4PPRO4CH1NG TH1S G4NG. K4rk4t h4s 4 n4sty t3mp3r probl3m 4nd h3 h4s s3nt s3v3r4l off1c3rs to th3 hosp1t4l 4ft3r th3y rough3d up h1s f3llow g4ng m3mb3rs."

The right hand slide changed to show Karkat and Gamzee in a cat-themed car speeding away from the Officers in the previous picture.

"[color="008282]4lso, N3p3t4 4pp4r3ntly h4s th3 4b1l1ty to turn 1nto 4 c4r.[/color]"
Laughter again erupted and Officer Sollux Captor could be seen covering his face in shame. Terezi pushed a different button on the remote and the map changed so the Settlements and Dockside were highlighted.

"Th3 K4rk4t G4ng pr1m4rily op3r4t3 1n th3s3 r3g1ons. But 4s 1 w1ll po1nt out l4t3r, th1s 1s not 4lw4ys tru3."

Officer Pyrope raised her hands to quiet the room and then press the remote. The right screen changed to show the silhouettes of four Dersites, four playing card symbols were suspended above them. The map now highlighted the entirety of the Narrows as well as the Lost District.

"Th1s 1s th3 M1dn1ght Cr3w. 4s you c4n s33, th3y op3r4t3 w1th1n Th3 N4rrows. But w3 strongly susp3ct th3y h4v3 op3r4t1ons runn1ng out of th3 Lost D1str1ct, wh3r3, qu1t3 fr4nkly, w3 just don't go und3r 4NY c1rcumst4nc3s."

"4s you c4n s33 th3 cor3 m3mb3rsh1p of th3 M1dn1ght Cr3w 4r3 th3s3 four D3rs1t3s. Th3y 4r3 4s follows: Sp4d3s Sl1ck, th3 g4ng's l34d3r; D14monds Droog, th31r m4st3rm1nd of th3 v4r1ous h31sts th3y pull; H34rts Boxc4rs, th31r pr1m4ry 3nforc3r 4nd muscl3; and Clubs D3uc3, th3 l34st-v1ol3nt m3mb3r 4nd th3ir d3mol1t1ons 3xp3rt."

The right screen changed, this time showing a female Prospitan.

"Th1s 1s Ms. P41nt, sh3 op3r4t3s 'Th3 P41nt Job' 1n Th3 N4rrows wh1ch 1s b3l13v3d to b3 th3 MC's b4s3 of op3r4t1ons though w3 h4v3 y3t to f1nd 4ny off1c4l l1nks prov1ng th1s b3yond h3r known r3l4t1ons w1th Sp4d3s Sl1ck."

Terezi walked to the first row of recruits and slapped her cane on the long table they were all sitting at, forcing everyone in the room to jump in shock.

"1 w1ll w4rn you now r3cru1ts, und3r no c1rcumst4nc3s 4r3 4ny of you to 4ppro4ch, h4r4ss or 3v3n th1nk 4bout 4rr3st1ng th3 m3mb3rs of th3 M1dn1ght Cr3w."

The right screen changed to show a mangled body. Only the blood-covered badge

identified it as a former member of the APD.

"If you find yours3lf f4c1ng th3 Cr3w, 1mm3d14t3ly c4ll 1n 31th3r Off1c3r C4ptor 4nd mys3lf or Lt Z4hh4k 4nd Off1c3r M3g1do to h4ndl3 th3 s1tu4t1on 4nd th3n qu1ckly l34v3 th3 sc3n3. W3 w1ll h4ndl3 th3m."

"1n f4ct r3cru1ts, 4ll you h4v3 to do 1n such s1tu4t1ons 1s to cont4ct d1sp4tch wh1ch 1s op3r4t3d by Off1c3r Vr1sk4 S3kr3t 4nd t3ll h3r 1t 1s th3 M1dn1ght Cr3w 4nd sh3'll g3t 4hold of us."

Terezi went through several other gangs. The Strider Mafia and The Felt both operating out Old Town. The Mobster Kingpin Mob that tried to run Foundry. The Mindfang Pirates which plagued the waters surrounding Alternia City. The Cult of the Secret Wizard which was based out the Lost District. Each one came with the same warnings as the Midnight Crew, don't approach - call in one of the senior officers and then run.

The last gang to be shown on the right side of the screen wasn't a gang at all, but the silhouette of troll with massive horns and what appeared to be a top hat. The entire city on the left screen flashed in agony.

"Th1s...1s th3 most v1ol3nt 4nd f34r3d cr1m1n4l w3 h4v3 to d34l w1th. Th1s 1s th3 cr1m1n4l ov3rlord, Mr Pup4."

Several of the recruits gasped. Mr Pupa's villainy was well known and what he did to those that crossed him - especially members of the APD - even more so.

"Th1s m4n 1s our s1ngl3 gr34t3st c4us3 of h34d4ch3s 4s h3 us3s both th3 K4rk4t G4ng 4nd th3 C1ty's v4st popul4t1on of consorts to r34ch 3v3ry s1ngl3 p4rt of 4lt3rn14 C1ty. W3 3v3n r3c31v3d word from Fort Sk414n th4t h3 1s susp3ct3d to b3 b3h1nd 4 r41d on th3ir R&D f4c1l1ty."

Terezi walked up to the tables again and stared disconcertingly at the recruits.

"Th3 w4rn1ngs 1 g4v3 you 4ll 34rl13r 4bout not try1ng to h4ndl3 th3 v4r1ous g4ngs yours3lv3s, 1nst34d g3tt1ng on3 of us s3n1or off1c3rs, go3s doubly so w1th th1s f1end."

Terezi turned around to face the projections and both sides changed. The left now showed a meek and pathetic troll in a wheelchair. The other side was an actual picture of Mr Pupa, standing tall and proud on a pair of robotic legs and wearing a monocle in addition to his top hat. The recruits all noticed very striking similarities between the two.

"Now, th3 1nd1v1du4l on th3 l3ft 1s th3 sol3 1nh3r1tor of th3 v4st N1tr4m fortun3 4ft3r th3 myst3r1ous d34th of h1s p4rents, T4vros N1tr4m. Th3 p3rson on th3 r1ght 1s Mr Pup4."

"Now you m4y not1c3 th4t th3r3 4r3 v3ry str1k1ng s1m1l4r1t13s b3tw33n Mr N1tr4m 4nd Mr Pup4. 1gnor3 th3s3. Th3y 4r3 not th3 s4m3 1nd1v1du4l."

She whipped out her cane to point out the wheelchair that Tavros Nitram used.

"4s you c4n s33, T4vros 1s cr1ppl3d 4nd p4th3t1c wh1l3 Mr Pup4 1s most c3rt41nly not. 4lso, Mr Pup4 l1k3s to w34r 4 top h4t 4nd monoc1 wh1l3 T4vros do3s not."
Everyone in the room gave Terezi confused and questioning looks.
"Y3s, 1 know th4t's 4 lo4d of bullsh1t, but th4t's th3 ord3rs not only from th3 Comm1s1on3r, but 4lso C1ty H4ll."

Terezi changed the projections to show several costume clad individuals. One was a female troll dressed in a black swimsuit and goggles with what appeared to be six mechanical tentacles projecting from her back, then there was a boy clad in a blue hoodie, then a man in what appeared to be crow-themed ninja garb and then finally a woman in what for lack of a better word was green witch's garb.

Terezi spun back around and smiled once again at the recruits, most of them visibly relaxed after the tense and frightening review of the major gangs that would use their innards to decorate lonely alley ways if they met them without back up.

"Now to som3th1ng much l1ght3r, our r3s1d3nt sup3rh3ro3s 4nd sup3rv1ll41ns."
Terezi walked around the room to stand next to Officer Captor, who was blushing brightly for some odd reason.

"Th3 fl1rst 1nd1v1du4l you s33 up th3r3 1s "Th3 Cuttl3f1shCull3r", sh3 fl1ps const4ntly b3tw33n b31ng 4 v1ll41n 4nd 4ss1t1ng us on som3 c4s3s. 1t just d3p3nds on wh4t h3r mood 1s 4nd wh4t's go1ng on."

Terezi started to giggle as she continued and so did several of the other senior officers, except for Officer Captor who was now covering his face with his hat.

"R3cru1ts, 1f you h4pp3n to run 4cross Th3 Cull3r wh1l3 out on p4trol or 1nv3st1g4t1ng 4 cr1m3 sc3n3, just g3t 4hold of Offic3r Sollux 'Lov3rboy' C4ptor r1ght h3r3. Sh3's just look1ng for 4 rom4nt1c d4t3 w1th h1m."

Now the recruits started to laugh, but Sollux whipped the hat from his face, eyes glowing and everyone in the room shut up.

"Oh c4lm down Off1c3r 4ppl3b3rry Bl4st, you two 4r3 so cut3 tog3th3r."

"4lr1ght, our n3xt 'h3ro' 1s th3 fool 1n th3 blu3 hood13. 3gb3rtm4n."

Terezi walked back over to the projections and used her cane to point the fool out.

"H3's 4ctu4lly qu1t3 h3lpful 4nd h4s prov1d3d 3xc3ll3nt 4ss1st4nc3. Don't worry 4bout h1m."

"N3xt 1s th3 v1g1ll4nt3 known 4s "CrowBro" or "Crowboy" d3p3nd1ng on wh3th3r or not you w4nt h1m to k1ck your 4ss 1f you m33t h1m f4c3 to f4c3."

Terezi rubbed a hand lovingly over the projection of CrowBro and sighed.

"W3 don't h4v3 4 lot of d34l1ngs w1th CrowBro, just w1th wh4t h3 l34v3s b3h1nd of cr1m1n4ls h3 g3ts 4hold of."

"F1n4lly, w3 h4v3 th3 gr33n-cl4d w1tch, Sp4c3l4ss."

Terezi looked at the final figure being shown and scratched her head.

"W3ll, fuck. W3 4ctu4lly don't know 4 whol3 lot 4bout h3r. Sorry"

And with that, she hit the remote again to turn off the projectors and bring back up the lights.

"4lr1ght, 1 1m4g1n3 34ch 4nd 3v3ryon3 of you r1ght now 1s wond3r1ng 3x4ctly why d1d you both3r b3com1ng 4 pol1c3 off1c3r 1n 4lt3rn14 C1ty 1f th3r3 1s so much th4t w3 31th3r don't d34l w1th, c4n't d34l w1th or 4r3 pr3v3nt3d from d34l1ng w1th by thos3 w1th th3 4ctu4l pow3r 1n th1s h1v3 of scum 4nd v1ll41ny. 1s th4t r1ght?"

Almost every single recruit nodded. A couple looked worried.

"W3 m4y not b3 4bl3 to d34l w1th th3 m4jor probl3ms f4c1ng th1s c1ty, but w3 c4n st1ll d34l w1th th3 sm4ll on3s. Th3 probl3ms th4t 4ctu4lly 4ffl1ct th3 h4rd-work1ng p3opl3 who just try to m4k3 4 l1v1ng 1n 4 cru3l world. W3 prot3ct th3m from th3 d4rkn3ss."

Terezi walked forward, hands behind her back. The senior officers that were previously hanging out at the back of the room all gathered behind her.

"R3m3mb3r R3cru1ts, you h4v3 jo1n3d 4 proud 4nd 1llustr1ous broth3rhood. 4n Org4n1z4t1on th4t 1s not h3r3 to s3rv3 th3 m1ghty, but to prot3ct th3 w34k 4nd down-trodd3n. W3 4r3 th3 sh13ld of th3 1nnoc3nt. R3m3mb3r th4t 4nd s3rv3 thos3 who n33d you proudly."

She and the senior officers then all saluted the recruits.

"Now, r3port to your 4ss1gn3d st4t1ons to r3c31v3 your f1rst t4sks 4nd m4k3 us proud."

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 1" by Wigmund

Why is this happening to me? Sollux thought to himself as he lay in the back seat of the small sedan about an hour or so outside of Alternia City.

Just hours before he thought it was going to be another ordinary day at work. He'd have a long shift, deal with that bullshit, then return to his tiny apartment and rooftop bee hives. But then he and Terezi, his squad partner, were called in to the Commissioner's office. They were told that something strange was going on in a podunk flyspeck north of Alternia City and that the town's police needed help from some professionals, so they went begging to the APD. Naturally, wanting to make a good impression with the neighbors, Mayor Wayne Vim decided to send them the APD's best: Officer Terezi Pyrope, the city's best detective and investigator, and Sollux Captor. With them, Mayor Vim also sent a civilian representative - his aide, Miss Peixes.

Now Sollux found himself in the back seat of Feferi's car as the girls sat up front, Feferi driving and Terezi controlling the radio. They chattered and laughed and sang along with the 80s soft rock stations that Terezi constantly sought out as they passed through various stations' broadcast areas.

Occasionally, Sollux would sit up to look at the passing scenery. He found the countryside somewhat peaceful. Though, being a city boy, the rusted-out hulks of old cars and barns spooked him almost as much as the cows did.

The cows got to him because they'd all stop eating in the fields to watch the car pass by. It freaked him out to see all those big droopy eyes just staring at them. They had to be plotting something.

As he contemplated the malevolence of livestock, from the front seat drifted the noise of the girls singing along yet again with whatever station Terezi had found.

"I just did in your arms tonight."

"It must have been some kind of kiss."

"I should have walked away," "I should have walked away"

"I hate to interrupt your wonderful thingy galh, but how much longer until we get to whatever fucking town we're going to."

"We're about thirty minutes away from Teapot, my little fish," Feferi replied as she smiled into the rear-view mirror at Sollux.

"What's wrong Aprilberry? Don't tell us you want to go away from F3f3r1 so quickly!"

Th1s 1s th3 flrst t1m3 you'v3 b33n tog3th3r w1th h3r h4v1ng to comm1t 4 cr1m3."
Both Feferi and Sollux blushed furiously as Terezi laughed at them. She then turned to Feferi, confused.

"T34pot? Th3 town's n4m3 1s T34pot?"

"Yep, it's named after a rock formation on the coast nearby."

"Let me guethh, iit lookth liike a biig teapot..."

")(ow did you...o)(it's kinda obvious isn't it? It's really cool looking if you ask me."

"You'v3 b33n to T34pot b3for3?"

"OF COURSE! My family)(as a summer retreat t)(ere. It's a lovely glubbing place. It's part of t)(e reason I'm coming along wit)(you guys. T)(e mayor wanted to save some money, so I decided to let you all use the retreat as a base of operations."

"So why d1dn't you just g1v3 us th3 k3ys to th3 pl4c3 4nd 4 m4p to g3t to T34cup?"

Feferi glanced back up into the rearview at Sollux who at this time was watching the cows again. She blushed.

"H3H3H3H3H3"

"What? What'th tho funny TZ?"

"Oh noth1ng. Noth1ng 4t 4ll...H3H3H3H3."

Eventually, the hours passed and they arrived in Teacup.

It was a tiny town, only a couple hundred people - a mix of trolls, humans and hybrids - lived here. The main part of town was literally nothing more than a square built around a courthouse/town hall right up near an old dock structure packed to the brim with fishing craft. The entire place smelled heavily of salt and fish. Most of that odor emanating from a large warehouse that processed the town's catch for shipping down to Alternia City and other destinations.

Feferi parked the car in front of the town hall and the three got out. Sollux surveyed the town as they walked up to the large, old brick structure. There were a couple of locals walking around.

All of them watching the newcomers. Small town curiosity obviously.

Feferi lead their way up to the mayor's office where they were filled in on what the hell was going on in Teapot.

Apparently people were just disappearing, and if they were found, it wasn't all them. Bits missing that kind of thing. The town sheriff and his deputies thought they had an out-of-town serial killer on their hands and they put all the meager resources they had into investigating what happened.

They were all killed and every single bit of paperwork in the police station was

missing. Meaning that Terezi and Sollux would have to work from scratch. Terezi smiled because she was going to enjoy this. Not only were they facing a serial killer or killers, they were dealing with someone that was intelligent and would actively try to hinder their investigation. She lived for stuff like this.

After talking to the mayor and getting the basics, Feferi took them up to her family's small cabin.

Which turned out to be much larger than Terezi's grandiose apartment and most definitely larger than Sollux's closet-sized place.

"I'm sorry guys, it's kinda small, but)(opefully it will be enoug)(for us."

"If thiith plathe wath any larger Feferii, II'd need a map to get around."

"(-E)(-E)(-E, you're suc)(a bass. Unfortunately, t)(ere's just a couple of rooms. So I guess Terezi and myself will take t)(e master bedroom w)(ile you take t)(e ot)(er one."

As it was getting late, they decided to spend the rest of the day getting set up at the Peixes place and getting rested after the long trip and preparation for the long day that awaited them tomorrow.

After dinner, Sollux decided to take a shower. It was lovely, he never had so much hot water to use. Not to mention a shower that he could move around in without worrying about tearing out the curtains and flooding the rest of his apartment. He stood there and just relished the decadence he found himself in. This day was going great.

That was, until he walked into the master bedroom to see how the girls were getting along and froze in his tracks.

They were ready for bed, but apparently had decided it was a great time to have a pillow fight.

He saw that Terezi was in a tank top and boxer shorts, which looked great on her figure. Feferi was...she was wearing something with spaghetti straps and lace and because of the angle Terezi had knocked her over to the doorway Sollux walked through, he got a good view of something tiny and stringy.

Sollux found himself unable to say whatever it was he wanted to say to the two.

"II...II...II...uhhh..."

"Sollux! 4r3 you p33k1ng on us!?"

"--E--E---E! G-ET OUT!"

They both threw their pillows at the dumbstruck troll and he fled back to the bedroom he was using. He made it back without much damage and laid down.

Wow, the bed was much larger than anything he was used to, but it was fairly comfortable...except for the pillows which were on the rigid side. He rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling as the day's events coursed through his mind.

They were in a small town far from home where someone or something was kidnapping and murdering people and when the police tried to stop it, they were wiped out. This was going to suck. But Terezi seemed excited about it. And the plus side though, Sollux thought to himself, they wouldn't spend all their time investigating this case so he and Feferi would have time to spend with each other.

He rolled over and fell asleep.

He slept uncomfortably for most of the night like he usually did. Thoughts coursed through his messed up and conflicted mind. Then something soft and warmed was next to him and he took in the smell of the sea and irises and drifted back to the Alternia City of his youth.

He was back home as a young boy. He was watching his mother in her garden. He always loved helping her there. He still did when he had the time, but when he was younger he really enjoyed it. It was always something new to him and his mother taught him about the various plants she grew and also about the bees which he really ended up loving.

They lived right on the edge of the Settlements up against Dockside and the city's river, so the smell of the sea and irises was something that frequently mixed for his growing nose. His family was poor, but they had lived in the city long enough that they had a proper house with a tiny yard. He had many siblings so the house was always crowded, but it was also filled with love. Something that brought him comfort even now. He might be a bipolar depressed troll with the ability to blast city blocks into rubble, but going to see his mother, siblings and various nieces and nephews always cheered him up and reminded him why he wanted to be a police officer. He wanted to protect them. He wanted to protect them because it was what his father did. It was what his father did before some two-bit thug knocking over a convenience store pulled out some cheap pistol and put a bullet in his chest.

Sollux drifted to his father's funeral. He remembered all the black clothing. He remembered the great big casket that they had put his father in. He remembered his mother crying, holding his youngest sister while the rest of her children gathered around her and cried as well. He remembered being too young to understand nothing

beyond the fact that his mother was sad and that for some reason he would never see his father again. He remembered never wanting to see his mother sad again.

So he always tried to make her smile. He would help her in her garden. He would pick the prettiest blossoms for her to show them off and she'd put them in a beautiful water-filled vase in the kitchen window. She really loved the purple irises. They were her favorite and they were the ones he put the most effort into growing.

And so, in Sollux's dream, he sat next to his mother, gardening. Laughing and enjoying himself as he talked to the woman who raised him and shaped him into the man he was now.

It was the best night's sleep Sollux Captor had since he left home and went to live on his own after becoming a police officer just like his father had been.

He slowly woke up and thought about how soft and comfortable the tough pillows had become overnight...

Then his sleep-clouded vision cleared enough to see that those weren't pillows.

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 2" by Wigmund

Officer Sollux Captor of the Alternia City Police Department, in the tiny fishing town of Teapot on an investigation of a series of disappearances/murders that primarily plagued tourists but then claimed the Teapot Sheriff's Department with his squad partner Officer Terezi Pyrope and the mayor's aide Ms Feferi Peixes, woke to find himself facing somethings that were most definitely not pillows.

One moment, Sollux was groggily waking up after the first good night's sleep he had in years. The next, he had his back on of the bedroom's walls and had in his panic, pinned himself to where the wall met the ceiling with his psionic powers. He stared in terror and embarrassment at what else was in his bed and had woken up due to Sollux's gibbering.

"W)(u)(? W)(at's wrong Sollux?"

"What are you doiing iin my bed?! Why were you thleepiing in here? II thought you were iin the other room wiith Terethi."

Feferi sat up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and focused on the half-naked troll floating near the ceiling. She gave him a sleepy smile.

"Well, first t)(ing, t)(is is actually MY B-ED. I used to sleep)(ere w)(en my family would travel)(ere."

"As for w)(y I'm in)(ere instead of wit)(Ms Pyrope...well, I was worried about you... So I came to see)(ow you were doing and I saw you asleep but you w)(ere tossing and turning and looked troubled."

She looked away because the memory of him looking so pained actually was not something she wanted to remember.

"I crawled in next to you and)(ugged you because it felt like somet)(ing you needed. But t)(en you cuttled in close and you just looked so)(appy...I ended up falling asleep..."

Feferi looked up at the man she so desperately wanted to be with. So much she went on criminal rampages to get his attention.

"Oh...II'm thorry about that-"

"I...I don't want to pry...you talked about your mot)(er while you slept-"

Sollux just stared at her.

"II'm not goiing to talk about that. IIt'th goiing to be a buthy day and II need to get ready. Tho iif you would pleathe leave the room tho II can get ready, iit would be apprethiiated."

Feferi cringed at this. Sollux was angry about something. She shouldn't have brought up his mother. She nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Ms Peixes went back to the room she and Terezi were sharing, got dressed and then walked into the living room where she was met by Terezi's incessant giggling.

"So, P31x3s, how w4s your 4ppl3b3rry Cobbl3r?"

Dirty grin. But Feferi just sat down opposite of Terezi and looked at the door leading to her old room.

"Not)(ing)(appened...I screwed up..."

Terezi cocked an eyebrow at the sad seatroll.

"I wanted to comfort)(im because I could sea that he was troubled. But during the nig(t)(e kept talking. It was about)(is mot)(er and)(ow)(e didn't want to sea)(er cry and)(ow)(e was going to protect)(er."

Feferi wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at Terezi.

"I barely mentioned t)(at to Sollux and)(e clammed up and tossed me out of the room."
"oh..."

"Did I do somet)(ing wrong? Is)(e going to)(ate me?"

She was about to start crying. Terezi sighed. Can't have shit like this so early in the day, there was much more important shit to deal with. So she sat down next to the poor girl and put an arm around her shoulder.

"Don't worry about th4t M1ss Gr4p3. C4ptor's just hyp3r d3f3ns1v3 about h1s f4m1ly 4nd do3sn't l1k3 t4lk1ng about th3m. 4s you s41d, h3'll just cl4m up 4nd shut down 1f th3y 4r3 m3nt1on3d."

"W)(at)(appened to t)(em?"

"Noth1ng, 3xc3pt for h1s f4th3r who w4s on3 of th3 fln3st off1c3rs to 3v3r s3rv3 th3 4PD 4nd w4s murd3r3d 1n 4 botch3d robb3ry tw3nty som3 odd y34rs ago. Th3y'r3 4ll 4l1v3 4nd w3ll 1n th3 H1v3sburg port1on of th3 S3ttl3m3nts. Hug3 f4m1ly."

Terezi smiled and nudged Feferi.

"1 4ctu4lly m3t h1s moth3r 4t on3 of th3 ch4r1ty b4lls honor1ng r3t1r3d fl4tf33t."

Terezi leaned in close and was starting to get Feferi to smile.

"You b3tt3r w4tch out M1ss flshy. Sh3's qu1ck w1tt3d w1th 4 tongu3 th4t 3v3n m4d3 m3 blush. 1f you 4nd Sollux 3v3r com3 to th3 r34l1z4t1on th4t th3 p3opl3 th4t would c4rp 4 flt 4bout you two b31ng tog3th3r don't m4tt3r for sh1t, you'll b3 1n for som3 fun."

Terezi started laughing as the mayor's aide blushed in embarrassment. Feferi wondered how could this blind girl be so damned perceptive, it was unnatural.

But before they could continue on, they both looked up to see Sollux standing behind them. He didn't look too happy.

"Talkiing about me behiind my back?"

"No...I...uh"

"Of cours3 you tw1t."

Sollux frowned at Terezi and then sighed. He apologized to Feferi for acting rude earlier and promised to make it up later. Then the two police officers left to start their

investigations, leaving Feferi alone in the cabin.

The two had decided that going plain clothes would hopefully help the locals trust them a bit more. Sollux wore what he usually did when he wasn't at work - mismatched tennis shoes, blue jeans and a black t-shirt with his zodiac symbol (mother was big into astrology) in mustard yellow on his chest. Terezi, whom Sollux had never seen out of uniform, wore a tank top, shorts, sandals and an open button-up shirt...Sollux swore that it was the same tank top she had slept in.

They went into town to start asking questions about the disappearances.

And got nothing but silence and cold stares.

"Well thiith hath been a fuckiing wathte of tiime. Wonder why they athked uth to come here."

"Th3y'r3 sc4r3d of som3th1ng. From wh4t 1 und3rstood from th1s sl33py town's m4yor 1s th4t only outs1d3rs w3r3 th3 on3s who v4n1sh3d. Up unt1l r3c3ntly wh3n som3th1ng h4pp3n3d th4t dr3w th3 sh3r1ff's 4tt3nt1on."

They paced around the town's square as Terezi worked things out in her head.

"Th3y d1dn't c4r3 4bout th3 tour1sts! Som3th1ng 3ls3 must h4v3 h4pp3n3d to m4k3 th3 loc4l cops p4y 4tt3nt1on."

4nd w3 n33d to t4lk to th3 m4yor 4g41n, 1 w4nt to ch3ck out th3 pol1c3 st4t1..."

Terezi stopped and stared to stare directly at the town hall. She was suddenly very worried.

"What'th wrong now Thniiffleth?"

"Sollux, do you r3m3mb3r much from our conv3rs4t1on w1th th3 m4yor?"

"A biit, he theemed thurpriithed to thee uth. But onthe we mentiioned that we were here to help them wiith..."

Now Sollux stared at the town hall in utter confusion.

"He wath thurpriithed. He diidn't know we we comiing."

"3x4ctly my d34r 4ppl3b3rry. Unt1l th31r cops w3r3 murd3r3d, th3y d1dn't 4sk for h3lp. 3v3n 4ft3r th4t, th3y d1dn't."

Terezi found a bench and sat down, resting her head upon her cane.

"So th3 qu3st1on 1s - Who told us 4bout th1s?"

Sollux sat down next to her and leaned back, staring at the sky. It was a nice summer day.

"Tho...thould we check the poliithe thtatiion or thould we track down whoever leaked the newth to uth?"

"St4t1on f1rst, th3n our 1nform4nt. 1 don't w4nt to los3 th3m wh1l3 w3'r3 busy 3ls3wh3r3."

They got up and walked, quite literally, across the street and opened the door to the

town's police department and jail.

Apparently no one had gotten around to cleaning the mess besides giving the sheriff and his deputies a proper burial. Blood stains were everywhere and there was a massive pile of ash in the middle of the front office where the perpetrator destroyed the place's paperwork.

"Lookth liike the aftermath of a Miidnight Crew hiit. Ethept there would be a crater nearby due to that Deuthe thiit."

"No, th3y'r3 m3ss13r. 4nd th3r3's som3th1ng 3ls3 h3r3..."

Terezi paced around the station. Like most of the buildings in town, it was a tiny building. There was the front office with several desks where the former staff worked, immediately connected to that were some jail cells, most likely for storing drunks than anything else. There were a pair of rooms off to the side of the office. Sollux checked those out to find a rest room and the other door was locked. Not much hindrance to a telekinetic, he unlocked the door and opened it to find the station's armory.

"You fiind anythiing interethtiing T-thi?"

"1 th1nk so, but 1'm go1ng to n33d mor3 th4n th1s to st4rt conn3ct1ng th3 thr34ds 1'v3 gr4sp3d so f4r. Wh4t 4bout you?"

Sollux walked into the armory, out of Terezi's line of scent and after a moment came up to her.

"Lookth liik3 our thycho mitthed thomethiing."

He presented a folder to Terezi who grinned evilly as she took a deep whiff of it.

"1 sm3ll f34r."

They walked outside, closing the station's door behind them.

Several locals watched them.

Fear and suspicion in their eyes.

"Dammiit, thiith iith goiing to be liike thothe horror thtorieth where the curiouth out-of-townerth are horriifiically murdered by thycho cultiitht localth iithn't iit?"

"H3H3H3H3"

Terezi's grin apparently was just enough to encourage the locals to continue with their business, but the two still felt like they were being watched. Sollux hated this, back in AC it meant horrifically bad shit was getting ready to go down very soon.

But here, it felt different. It felt like someone - or something - was calculating

something.

"Fuckiing creepy plathe."

"Don't b3 such 4 d3pr3sso 4ppl3b3rry.

Th3y'r3 not go1ng to bust 1n on you 4nd M1ss Gr4p3 dur1ng th3 n1ght to s4cr1f1c3
you two to th3 horrort3rrors."

The two started walking back to the cabin, they had spent quite a bit of time searching the station. They wouldn't have enough time to track down their informer and question them today, besides Terezi really wanted to dig into the folder Sollux found in the station's armory. Someone had hidden that while they were scared for their life, she could smell it and she wanted to find out why.

"Th3y'r3 4fr41d of som3th1ng Sollux.

And 1t's not us."

As they walked out of town, shadow on the station's roof watched them leave.

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 3" by Wigmund

The Alternia City cops made it back to the Peixes cabin to find that their host had already prepared dinner. Sollux was surprised at how good it was, but it didn't help that every time he relished a bite Terezi would start grinning at him. Dammit Pyrope, what now?

After that meal, Sollux and Terezi set up in the living room and started pouring through the folder they found in the armory of the Teapot Sheriff's Department. They poured through the paperwork, it was a meager amount - but it did list the disappearance victims and their last known locations as well as details about the event that forced the Sheriff to pay attention. Someone besides the few tourists Teapot seasonally received disappeared - the Sheriff's own daughter vanished from her bedroom in the middle of the night and then the Sheriff and his deputies were brutally murdered in their own offices.

The two cops tried to find any other clues that would help, but couldn't. Whoever had hidden the file did so quickly and fearfully - Terezi could smell it on the paperwork - they had prepped this as death was coming for them. She wanted to find whoever was responsible for this and make them pay.

Sollux was busy looking over the tourist disappearances, but unfortunately he couldn't make sense of everything since he didn't know what this area.

"Hey Fef? Ilt h there a map of the town iin the cabiin?"

"Yea)(, t)(ere's one mounted on a corkboard in the master bedroom. Do you need it?"

"If you don't miind."

Feferi brought out the corkboard and Sollux saw that it not only had the town, but several miles of countryside - including the Teapot Formation. Perfect.

Sollux used some thumbtacks and marked the locations of all the tourist disappearances, as well as the Sheriff's Department and the Sheriff's house. He looked at the map and cussed.

No pattern. It was all over the damned place.

"Fuck. Guethh we have to go back and torment the localth. II doubt they'll be any help."

"D4mm1t, th3r3 h4s to b3 som3th1ng 3ls3 Sollux."

Sollux went through the paperwork.

"No, there'th only the tiimeth and platheth the tourithtth diithappeared."

"Wh4t t1m3s d1d th3y d1s4pp34r 4t?"

"It'th all diifferent tiimeth, Terethii."

He pointed to a several pins.

"Thethe guyth diithappeared around..."

Sollux stopped.

He looked at the times for each person and clustered them by generally similar times. He then picked out the pins corresponding to them.

Except for the Sheriff's department and his daughter, it was a series of rings that circled the town. The later the time, the closer to town the person disappeared. The earliest disappearance happened halfway to the Teapot.

"Looks l1k3 w3'v3 got 4 p4tt3rn."

Terezi took a deep breath and then rearranged the pins. Not where they were placed, but the colors used at each location. It looked random to Sollux, but Terezi had her obsessions.

"4nd now 1t sm3lls lov3ly."

Feferi peeked of their shoulders and pointed to where the circle converged in town.

"T)(at's t)(e General Store. T)(ere's no way t)(e owner could)(ave anyt)(ing to do wit)(t)(is! He's so NIC-E."

The cops looked up at her.

"You know th3 own3r of th4t pl4c3?"

"OF COURS-E! I've come to t)(is town since I was just a small fry. Most of the people)(ere know my family!"

Sollux and Terezi glanced at each other.

"Tho...uh...Fef, do you want to come into town with uth tomorrow morning to help uth athkiing the localth about thiith cathe?"

"W)(y?"

"1n c4s3 you d1dn't not1c3 4t th3 town h4ll, th3y don't trust us."

"We're outthiiderth. Maybe they townthfolk wiill talk to you."

"O)()()(..."

Feferi thought about it for a moment then started bouncing around and doing her bubbly thing.

"-E-E-E-E-E!!! I get to)(elp my catc)(wit)(real police work!"

She hugged Sollux and then ran off to the master bedroom.

Terezi just gave the blushing troll her wide, toothy grin. He gave her a dirty look and then started to smile back at her.

"How'th Thtriider?"

The smile disappeared and he earned a cane upside the head.

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 4" by Wigmund

That evening, Sollux slept without having anyone crawl into bed with him and without his usual tormented dreams.

The following morning, he got up to find that his cabin mates were ready to go before he had even left bed. So, they decided to grab breakfast at a restaurant Feferi said was on the town square and was just GR--EAT!!.

It was a standard bar/restaurant that is present in most every small in the US, though Sollux himself had never been in a place like this before. Feferi walked in like she ate at the place every day of her life. They took a booth at the back of the main room that gave them a good view of the place and also through the front windows at the town square.

Feferi ordered for the three of them since Terezi was horrifically distracted by the delicious smells that assaulted her nose when they entered the place and Sollux lost himself in the menu. About half an hour later they got their meals. Sollux looked at his plate: scrambled eggs, sausage links, hashbrowns. Terezi positively flipped her shit when she received a stack of stuffed french toast and found that there was a cream cheese and cherry mixture inside them. Feferi smiled at the two cops as they tore into their meals before starting on her own dish of biscuits and gravy and an omelet.

Their love of the local cuisine seemed to have a calming effect on the locals who were watching them suspiciously. As they finished their meals, the waitress walked up to them and asked them if they needed anything. They didn't need anything, but Feferi spoke up.

"Thank you for the wonderful meals. I always love eating)(ere w)(en my family comes to t)(e cabin."

"Oh no problem dear. We're always happy to see your kin here. But..."

The woman glanced at Sollux who was sitting next to Feferi and at Terezi who was still in ecstasy over the cherry-stuffed french toast.

"umm, What brings you and you're friends into town?"

Feferi gave the woman a worried and concerned look and took her hands.

"We're)(ere to)(elp you all. Someone told the Alternia Mayor's office about somet)(ing going on)(ere and t)(at t)(e S)(eriff needed our)(elp."

The woman started to pull away, looking around in barely concealed terror.

"No please, don't! We want to)(elp! I want to)(elp!"

The waitress leaned in close to Feferi and whispered something into her gill-ears.

Feferi's eyes narrowed and she quieted down. The three finished their meals, Feferi paid for the meal and they left the restaurant.

"What diid thhe say two you?"

"1t w4s 4 l34d w4sn't 1t?"

Feferi closed her eyes and hugged herself.

"No...s)(e said 'Save Yourselves'."

Feferi's eye teared up and Sollux pulled her in for a hug.

"S)(e was terrified Sollux! T)(ey aren't being rude to us. T)(ey want us to leave for our own safety!"

"Unfortunately, now II really want to fiind out what the fuck iith goiing on."

They walked across the square to the now-open General Store. Feferi lead the way inside and started to shop for supplies they actually needed up at the cabin. As she did so, Sollux and Terezi noted the behavior of everyone inside.

Terrified and scared now that they knew what to look for. Same suspicious glances.

When there was no one else left in the store, Feferi went up to buy the groceries and to talk with the store's owner.

"I know why you all here. You don't need to beg me for an answer Miss Peixes."

"W1ll you h3lp us th3n?"

"Didn't say that. But I will give you a hint."

"Leave town for our own thafety?"

The owner smiled grimly and shook his head.

"Well besides that, I think you're looking in the wrong area."

Terezi nudged Sollux and glared at him.

"S1r, wh4t 3ls3 h4s b33n go1ng on? B3s1d3s th3 d1s4pp34r4nc3s 4nd th3 murd3r of your Sh3r1ff 4nd h1s d3put13s?"

"Something's been stalking us."

"Wh4t?"

"No one quite knows. Every person I've heard tell gives a different description of what they saw."

The owner shifted uncomfortably and glance out his window. He seemed to be tense despite that there was nothing outside.

"But each person does agree on the same thing. What they saw was something they had dreamed about recently."

"Wh4t do you m34n s1r?"

"I'm saying that each person said they had dreamed about the thing they saw before they saw it following them around."

He finished sacking up the groceries and pushed them over to the three.

"I'm sorry, but that's all I'm going to say. I'm afraid I said too much."

They thanked him for his help anyways and left the store.

Back at the cabin, Terezi studied the map as Sollux and Feferi put away the groceries. Sollux could tell that Feferi was freaked out by the fear she saw in town. He put a hand on her shoulder and tried to reassure her, but she shook his hand off and kept putting away the supplies.

"Fef..."

"It's not)(ing Sollux, I'm fine."

"No you're not. You look liike you're about the fliip out or thomethiing."

Feferi suddenly stopped and slammed a can down on the counter top, causing Sollux to jump back. She gave him a glare and bared her many sharp teeth.

"W)(Y S)(OULDN'T I?! SOM-ET)(ING IS T)(R-EATENING T)(-ES-E P-EOPL-E!"

She stalked up to Sollux and looked up into his face. Her eyes were tearing up.

"Somet)(ing is scaring these people and t)(reatening t)(em and t)(ere's not)(ing I can do to)(elp t)(em..."

"Yeth there iith Fef. We're helpiing them. Even though they athked uth no two, we're thtiill goiing to fiind out what the fuck iith goiing on."

He wrapped his arms around the now crying sea troll and hugged her as she sobbed.

"We're goiing to thtop thiith and thave them. II promiithe that."

From the living room, Terezi started to giggle.

"Why don't you two just g3t 1t ov3r w1th 4nd t4k3 som3 t1m3 1n 4ppl3b3rry's room?"

They turned to look at the sarcastic woman who was giving them an incredibly dirty grin. The two trolls suddenly took a step back from each other and blushed. Terezi's eyebrows dropped with her smile.

"Clu3l3ss fools."

Feferi brushed her hair away from her face and went back to shelving the cans. Sollux went into the living room to find out what Terezi was studying.

"You know, you r34lly should just do 1t."

"Thhut the fuck up you nothey pthycho."

"H3H3H3H3H3"

"Why are you lookiing tho iintently at the map?"

Terezi flashed her shit-eating grin.

"Look1ng 4t? How c4n 1 look 4t 4nyth1ng Sollux?"

1'M BL1ND!"

Terezi started to laugh again as Sollux glared at her.

"You know what the fuck II mean you loon."

"4lr1ght, 4lr1ght."

Terezi pulled the map over to herself and then noted the pins and their times.

"Why 3x4ctly d1d w3 ch3ck out th3 town?"

"Becauthe that'th where the thiircle converged. The later the tiime, the thiircle rethedeth back to town ath the perp maketh theiir way back to theiir hiidey-hole."

Terezi reached out with her cane and rapped Sollux on his forehead.

"You'r3 look1ng 4t 1t b4ckw4rds!"

She pointed at the town.

"4s th3 n1ght progr3ss3s, th3 p3rp g3ts clos3r to town. So th4t m34ns who3v3r or wh4t3v3r 1s st4lk1ng th3s3 p3opl3 1s h1d1ng som3wh3r3 up h3r3."

Her cane slapped down on the Teapot.

Sollux looked at the map and then up at Feferi who was finished in the kitchen, but stayed in there wiping away tears.

"Hey Fef, are there any platheth to hiide up near the Teapot?"

")(u)(? O)(...yea)(..."

Feferi came into the living room and indicated several areas near the pin closest to the Teapot.

"T)(ere's an entrance rig)(t)(ere in fact."

Terezi smiled and glanced at the other two.

"Gu3ss w3 found our t4rg3t for tomorrow."

While they readied themselves what lay ahead. Something stood outside the cabin and watched them through the open window.

When they all retired to their rooms it raised its hand and there was a purple glow.

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 5" by Wigmund

In the morning, Sollux woke up to the sounds of Terezi yelling and crashing around the cabin. He groggily got up and walked into the living room where he found his partner running in and out of the bedroom she and Feferi shared.

"What'th the deal? Why are you thmathhing thhiit?"

Terezi stopped and looked at Sollux in shock.

"It's F3f3r1. Sh3's not h3r3. Sh3 got up l4st n1ght 4nd 1 c4n't f1nd h3r 4nywh3r3!"

Sollux froze.

"What. What do you mean thhe'th? Fef iith miithhiing?"

"Of cours3 you th1ck-h34d3d tw1t! Sh3 just got up 4nd l3ft."

Terezi collapsed onto the couch and cradled her face in her hands. Teal tears were streaming down her face, staining her white tank top.

"1 should h4v3 gott3n up! 1 should h4v3 4sk3d h3r wh4t sh3 w4s do1ng wh3n sh3 d1dn't h34d for th3 b4throom..."

Terezi sobbed heavily and then gave a very weak laugh.

"1 gu3ss 1 thought sh3 w4s go1ng to p4y you 4 v1s1t."

Sollux walked over to Terezi and embraced her as she cried onto his bare shoulder. He didn't know what to say.

Feferi missing? Was it something he did? Was it because she's upset about the townsfolk? Was it their murderer trying to send them a message?

That had to be it. Feferi wasn't that foolish to just run off by herself. Something foul had happened.

His grip around Terezi tightened involuntarily as rage filled him. She gasped...and then started to giggle.

"What?! What'th tho funny?"

"4ll you'r3 w34r1ng 1s box3r shorts..."

"Tho? Why'th that tho iimportant riight now? Feferii iith miithhiing and probably in terriible danger!"

"1 know 4ppl3b3rry...1t's just th4t..."

Sollux pulled back from Terezi and glared at her, he had left his shades next to his bed in the confusion, so she got full blast of his red and blue eyes focusing on her in anger.

"Jutht thpiit iit out gog fuckiing dammiit!"

"Your w34pon 1sn't conc34l3d r1ght now."

Sollux looked down, blushed, grabbed a pillow and covered himself.

"II...II..."

He backed up towards his bedroom as Terezi rolled on the couch laughing herself breathless, glowing a vibrant teal.

After taking a quick shower and getting dressed, he returned to the living room to find that Terezi had done the same. They both had decided to wear their body armor now. They were going to need it when they went into the Teapot Caves.

And with that, they headed off.

Sollux ended up flying to the caves, carrying Terezi on his back. Quicker that way, especially since there were no roads leading to the caves. He landed in the area that the pin marking the disappearance closest to their destination was and looked around.

He was surprised that the caves were right in front of them. Terezi stood next to him and gazed into the darkness, breathing heavily as she tried to take in everything she could.

"1t sm3lls l1k3 d34th h3r3."

"II thmell that mythelf."

"1 sm3ll gr4p3s 4s w3ll. Th3 sc3n't fr3sh so F3f3r1 must h4v3 p4ss3d by r3c3ntly. Do3sn't sm3ll l1k3 h3r blood, so sh3's 4l1v3."

"For now..."

Terezi smacked the sullen troll in the head with her cane.

"Don't you fuck1ng s4y th4t! W3'll f1nd h3r Sollux 4nd w3'll solv3 th1s c4s3!"

With that, she walked into the cave. Sollux sighed and followed her into the darkness.

He was surprised by how dark it was in here. Trolls, being descended from cave-dwellers, had excellent vision in darkness...but the shadows were so thick, Sollux had to create a glow using his powers. Terezi was affected by the caves as well, by the overpowering stench of death.

She reached out and grabbed Sollux's arm and let him lead her onwards. She had been so dependent on her smell, that she didn't trust her cane to tell her what was at her feet.

"How f4r down do th3s3 c4v3s go? 1 c4n't t3ll, 4ll 1 sm3ll 1s bl4ck l1cor1c3. 1 c4n sm3ll oth3r th1ngs, but th3 l1cor1c3 m4k3s my nos3 hurt."

"Feferii thaiid thethe caveth weren't that deep, but nobody liiked comiing here tho they were never really ecthplored very well."

Down into the earth the two trekked, shadows wrapping around the sphere of light Sollux had created almost as if they wanted to get ahold of the cops.

Eventually, they reached a fork in the cave. Sollux tried to look down the branches, but couldn't make anything out beyond the light's glow. Terezi took a deep breath and her grip on his arm tightened.

"Wh1ch way Tthhii?"

"1 c4n sm3ll th3 s4m3 th1ngs from both p4ths. 1 c4n sm3ll d34th, F3f3r1 4nd som3th1ng 3ls3 both w4ys."

She cocked an eyebrow in confusion.

"What?"

"Th4t oth3r sm3ll...1'v3 sm3ll3d 1t b3for3...but 1 c4n't pl4c3 1t."

"Tho...thould we both go down the thame path or thpliit up?"

Terezi's manic grin returned and she reached into her pockets and retrieved a flare.

"Of cours3 w3 should spl1t up."

"What'th wiith the flare?"

Terezi glanced around nervously as she activated it.

"1 don't trust th3 sh4dows h3r3. Som3th1ng's wrong w1th th3m."

Sollux looked around them and finally noticed the same thing. The shadows positively crept around them, occasionally trying to reach into the glow from his light and her flare before suddenly retracting in a puff of acrid smoke.

"That'th really fuckiing creepy."

"1 know."

Sollux gave Terezi a quick hug and they split up, each heading down their own pathways.

It was long and dark. The smells of death assaulted Sollux's nose, he couldn't imagine how badly Terezi was affected. But she was strong and could make it.

Down the other corridor, Terezi slowly made her way down into the darkness. Her sense of smell was almost completely clouded by death, but she could just barely make out her immediate surroundings. She kept her flare raised in one hand and swept the ground in front of her using her cane with her other. Normally, she would have been just fine with the cane and her nose...but these shadows...she could smell that something was wrong with them. It had to be magic of some sort. Something bad was

ahead, she didn't know what.

She just hoped that Feferi and Sollux were safe.

As she rounded a corner, the smells suddenly changed. She could perceive the world around her much more clearly now. Too clearly.

She was back in Alternia City, in her uniform on a foot patrol through what smelled like Old Town. She took a deep breath, smiled and continued her patrol.

As she walked the beat, she heard a noise behind her. She didn't spin around because she knew who it was.

Dave...the real one...her David Cadell Strider.

She felt it as he walked up behind her and wrapped his lean, muscular arms around her. How she longed for this. Just them, together. Nothing else to both them.

He turned her around and looked down into her glasses, smiling that ironic smirk she loved so much.

"Well, well. What's a beautiful troll like you doing in this fucking shit hole? You have to be careful around here, never know when perverted sicko could leap out of an alleyway and try to sell you strange literature."

"1 b3l13v3 th4t's not som3th1ng 1 n33d to worry 4bout. But 1 should b3 worr13d 4bout oth3r s1ckos."

His smirk widened into a smile, mirroring the one she wore.

"Now what kind of fucking troll-loving fetishists could you ever be talking about? I'm sickened that there's something worse here."

Terezi giggled and reached up to his shades, removing them so she could smell his wonderful, beautiful cherry red eyes. He brushed back some of her hair that had spilled into her when he grabbed her.

They leaned in and kissed. Terezi pressed herself into Dave. He pressed into her.

And it was wonderful.

Elsewhere, Sollux found himself trudging through the darkness. Stone and dirt crunching under his mismatched shoes. He never knew why he always ended up with mismatched shoes, it just happened. He could leave a matched pair as the only

available shoes to wear and when he puts them on, he'd always find that one wasn't like the other. Frustrated his superiors to no end until he showed them the phenomenon at work with a pair of shoes provided from the uniform room.

That shut them up quickly.

Sollux smiled at the memories of their shocked faces as he rounded a corner in the caves.

Then he stopped when the noise under his feet changed. It was no longer stone and dirt, but something softer...grass.

He saw that it was light outside as he walked through a beautiful flower filled garden. Irises, violets, daffodils, lilies, morning glories and dozens of other varieties bloomed around him filling the air with beautiful smells.

He followed the path that wound its way through the garden, he reached up to a fully-bloomed iris and picked it.

Mother would love this, he tucked it into the pocket of his coveralls and raced ahead, sticking his arms out to his sides as if he was flying.

He rounded a bend and found the woman he was looking for. She was an older, yet still beautiful, troll. Bearing a large number of children had left their weight upon her, yet still her younger self was apparent underneath. Age had not taken its toll upon her, it had enhanced her.

Young Sollux ran up to her and presented her the flower.

"Mama! Mama! Look at thiith iiriith! IIt'th tho beautiiful!"

"II 2ee my liittle bee. IIt'2 wonderful."

She took the bloom away from her beaming little boy and smiled at him, he giggled and hugged her. He loved his mother, he was going to keep care of her forever.

Mrs. Captor stood up and brushed the dirt from the folds of her dress. She looked down at her son and took his hand.

"Diid you fiind your liittle friiend Honeybee? 2he wa2 2o exciited to come vii2iit u2."
"Thhe iith here? II diidn't know that Mama!"

Mama smiled and lead him deeper into the gardens. They entered a clearing and he saw his little friend. She was looking intently at a patch of violets and irises that were the same color as her large gorgeous eyes. As the two Captors approached, she turned

around and clapped, squeeling loudly as she charged towards the boy she liked so much.

"Sollux t)(ere you are you silly fis)!"

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 6" by Wigmund

Mama's little honeybee watched as his bestest friend in the world ran up to him and gave him one of her 'BIG HUGS!!!'. As she did so, Sollux gave his mother a nervous look of embarrassment, but only saw that she was smiling happily at them.

He turned back to his friend and pushed her away slightly. She gave him her always effective, large watery puppy eyes. She was worried about him, yet so happy that he was here with her.

"W)(at's glubbing you, fish)(sticks?"

"Not iin front of mama..."

"W)(y?! S)(e knows...s)(e's always known about us you glubbing idiot."

"II..."

Sollux closed his eyes and took a deep breath, this was going to be difficult...

He heard this was the hardest part of the whole thing. That's what his brothers and sisters told him.

Get through this day and if you choose well, the rest of your life was going to be great.

He opened his eyes to take in the Grand Cathedral of Alternia City, one of the oldest buildings still standing in the city. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, further brightening the violets and black-eyed susan lined hall.

As Sollux was trying to take in what was going on, music started up and the doors at the far end of the hall opened up. Into the great hall walked a woman dressed in a gorgeous white gown, her face concealed behind a veil. She was being escorted by the mayor of the city itself, he had apparently begged her family to let him do this.

After an eternity, she was in front of Officer Captor. He couldn't hear anything over the pounding in his ears. He had to be nudged in the back by his best man to know when to respond at the appropriate parts.

Finally, it was time for the seal. The seal that would tie these two souls together...

And something was wrong...

Sollux blinked and looked around at the hall.

This was all wrong.

This couldn't happen.

And the way things currently were, it would never happen.

A hand reached out and tugged on his shoulder, turning him back to the bride. She removed her veil and looked up at him. Her violet eyes brimming with tears.

"W)(at's wrong? Isn't t)(is w)(at you wanted?"

"No...II...Yeth...thiith iith what II want...but..."

"But w)(at? We're here my fis)(y love. It's-"

Tears came to Sollux's eyes as what was going on.

"Not real."

And with that, the hall twisted and warped out of existence. Leaving Sollux in his t-shirt and jeans standing next to Feferi in a gorgeous wedding gown.

"W)(at do you mean it's 'not real'?"

She took his hands and pulled him close to her, desperately trying to hold onto him.

"Isn't t)(is w)(at you want?"

Isn't t)(is w)(at you've dreamed about?"

He looked up into the inky darkness and tried to hold back his emotions, hold back the tears, hold back the sorrow at having something in his grasp that he probably never would in real life, hold back the agony of having to run away from his dream.

Hold back the rage that someone would turn those dreams against him.

"II't iith what II've dreamed about...but that'th what thiith iith.

II'th a dream, nothiing but a dream and II need to rethcue you Feferi."

He leaned in and kissed her.

"Don't worry II'm comiing for you."

He shook his hands away from her, lit up his light and started to walk into the darkness.

Leaving the weeping bride behind him.

"You'll never find)(appiness! You're going to be alone forever!"

"You've failed me boy! You failed to protect u2 all!"

"ALON--E! You'll never be)(appy!"

"Why couldn't you 2ave your father?"

"I)(AT-E YOU! YOU W-ER-E NOT)(ING BUT AN ILLICIT FLING!"

"You've failed at everthiing you've ever done! Giive up 2ollux!"

Sollux continued walking despite the urge to turn around and counter the heckling. He wanted to, but those were nothing but shadows of his own tortured mind.

Nothing but shadows.

Sollux stopped and raised the globe of light he was using.

"II haven't failed yet."

He increased the energy in the ball until it burned with the radiance of the sun.

Burning away all the shadows in the area.

Burning away the twisted mockeries of the two women he loved most in life.

Sollux turned back the intensity until the globe was little more than a flashlight like earlier. He looked around and noticed that he was in yet another chamber of the cavern system. He found the tunnel he had entered the place from.

And he turned around to find another tunnel, coming in almost right next to the one he used. He froze and turned out to scan the room, fearing what he would find nearby.

Nothing.

Nothing but Terezi standing in the middle of the hall. Grasping and rubbing onto something that wasn't there.

Sollux walked up to his partner, cautiously halting everytime a small moan escaped her.

Pain? Torment? He listened closely to her mutterings and the moans again...Pleasure?

He reached out to the dream-locked woman who was-

-in the place she always wanted to be.

Arm in arm with the man she loved dearly.

They were in bed, looking into each others eyes...well, he was looking into her reddened eyes and she was taking in the wonderful cherry scent of him, but the intent was the same.

She shuddered as he reached out and tenderly brushed his hand up her bare skin from her hips to her shoulder. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for another kiss.

Another passionate kiss that would inevitably lead to another round of intimate connection.

They had soaked the bedsheets hours earlier with their sweat, so there was nothing covering them except the darkness of the room.

They rolled and Terezi moaned in ecstasy as Dave worked his magic on her. She longed for these moments, every single minute of the day.

But they could never satisfy themselves like this. They couldn't let their guard down except on very rare occasions.

She wept with joy whenever he was near her like this. Whenever they could join like they wanted to. It gave her crazy life meaning.

Sure, the work she did on the APD meant a lot and let her satisfy some urges. But

there were other urges, other cravings.

All the men she had met before hand could never satisfy them. Starting as far back as that boy she lived next to in what's now the Lost District and going through a long, seemingly never-ending line of others she met as she went through life in a blinded daze.

That was, until she met Dave Strider.

She first met the man she would come to love and who would come to love her on one of her many investigations into the goings-on in the city. He was the victim of a theft by who she would find out had been her first love...someone she had thought lost back in the same Disaster that took away her sight. When she brought back the victim's belongings, the man noticed that she was upset about something.

He somehow got her to talk about it.

And for some reason, she did. For anyone else, she would never let down her armor, never let down her shields, never let down the manic grin and sociopathic humor that helped protect her.

But she did with this cherry-eyed human.

They talked for what was only minutes, but then they met up after her shift was over and they talked for hours more.

She learned his name, he hers. They shared their life stories, both completely letting down their guard in each other's presence.

They fell in love and made love that night.

It was the best night of her life.

So was every night they could be together.

Even after the cherry-eyed man took to a life of crime and vigilantism after his brother, the man who had raised him and taught him everything he knew about life, was brutally murdered by one of the city's many criminals. She still stayed with him.

But now she had to keep it on the sly.

Otherwise her job was at risk, as was both their lives if any of the criminals they angered found out.

But for now she was with him and that was all that mattered. She could sense daylight showing through the blinds of what was either her or his apartment...she didn't know, she didn't keep track of where they went after they ran into each other earlier.

She leaned back and gasped in passion. She was enjoying this. She was-

-confused and absolutely furious to find Officer Captor shaking her awake.

"Wh4t fuck do you w4nt? 1'm...1'm"

"Thandiing iin the miiddle of a cave makiing happy noiitheth."

Terezi blushed furiously and took in the smells of the dank, dark and cold cavern.

No one was here but her and Sollux and the smell of death and black licorice.

Tears came to her eyes and Sollux took her into his arms as she shuddered in grief and anger.

Grief at being woken up from the greatest dream of her life.

Anger that someone had used her dreams, used her love, as a weapon against her.

She pulled back from Sollux and turned away from him. She used her shirt to wipe away the teal streaks that ran down her now puffy face.

"II'm thorry Terethhii. II'm thorry."

"H3H3H3, no n33d to 4polog1z3 4ppl3b3rry."

She turned around and glared at her partner, a malevolent grin splitting her still tear-stained face.

"You'r3 not th3 fuck1ng 4ssh0l3 who tr13d to corrupt my dr34ms."

"You okay?"

"I'll b3 ok4y wh3n I f1nd who3v3r d1d th1s to m3 4nd str1ng th3m from th3 T34pot's spout."

She walked up to Sollux and picked up the cane she had dropped at his feet when he woke her up. Her flare had gone out and she still didn't trust the shadows her despite Sollux burning them away with his energy flare.

"L3t's f1nd this sh1th34d 4nd l3t's f1nd F3f3r1."

And so they they continued deeper into the caves.

Deeper into the black bowels of the earth.

Until they reached another massive cavern.

Sollux stopped in horror as he saw Feferi in the middle of the chamber, tied down to the ground on top of some eldritch symbol, blindfolded, gagged and her blouse cut open, revealing her torso.

Besides her, the place was littered with the bones of those who had come here before her.

Gnawed on.

Next to Feferi, Sollux saw a black-cloaked figure. It turned around when the police officers entered the chamber, bringing their dreadful light with them.

The thing's black cloak covered it from head to foot, the only thing exposed was it's yellow snout and malevolent pink eyes, and an almost-black purple scarf was wrapped around its neck. In its grasp was a knife as dark as the shadows that lingered around Sollux and Terezi, in the other hand was a twisted and gnarled needle.

A needle that glowed with a nasty purple light.

A light that intensified as the salamander raised the wand towards the officers and hissed at them in anger, rage and bloodlust.

"The Teapot Mystery, Part 7" by Wigmund

"A Conthort?!"

"G3T DOWN!"

Terezi tackled Sollux, knocking him to the ground as a tendril of black-purple energy struck at where they were standing. The two then crawled around the chamber's walls, trying to keep behind piles of rock, bones and gog knows what else. Every time they showed themselves, the sorcerer would fire off another tendril at them.

"Glubbiing hell!"

"W3ll 1 w4sn't 3xp3ct1ng th4t."

"What, that our perp iith a magiikth-thliingiing thalamander?"

"Th4t too, but your cho1c3 of curs3s 4s w3ll."

"Not now Pyrope."

"1 know, 1 know."

Terezi sat back against a pile of debris that was currently shielding them from the salamander's wrath and inhaled deeply. Sollux knew this, she was scoping the surroundings in her special way. Good thing they were pinned down or she might have started licking stuff. He was amazed that she hadn't come down with some horrible kind of rot from doing that on the streets of Alternia City.

"What'th out there?"

Terezi continued to breathe deeply as bolts of energy dug into their cover.

"Just th4t l1ttl3 sh1t. Why don't you try shoot1ng th3 bolts 4s th3y com3 1n?"

Sounds l1k3 th3y t4k3 4bout th3 s4m3 t1m3 4s your 3y3bolts to ch4rg3 up."

Sollux stared at his crazy partner. Sure, why not. Couldn't hurt to try. They were dead if they stayed in their current location anyways.

Sollux charged his eyes and peeked out from behind cover to find another tendril coming for his face.

He fired his eyebeams and the two forces collided in midair. They mixed and erupted in a small clap of thunder that reverberated through out the cavern.

"1 t4k3 from th3 r4ck3t th4t 1t work3d?"

"Fuckiing hell, my earth are riingiing."

And with that, the two trolls came from behind cover and started to approach the consort who continued to furiously fire bolts at them. As they neared the eldritch circle, the consort dropped the wand and raised its knife and jumped behind Feferi's pinned body.

"Fuck that you liittle thhiit."

Sollux fired off another blast, catching the thing in its chest as started to bring the knife down for what would have been a fatal blow. The consort was lifted off of its feet and into a pile of bones.

Out cold.

Sollux and Terezi quickly got to work untying Feferi. Sollux helped her to her feet as Terezi walked over to the consort, reaching into her pack to pull out a long length of rope.

A noose had already been prepared for this occasion.

"You thought you could tortur3 th3 p3opl3 of th1s 4r34 by corrupt1ng th31r dr34ms d1dn't you?"

She picked up the barely conscious salamander by the scarf around its neck.

"You 1nv4d3d p3opl3's most pr1v4t3 s4nctums 4nd turn3d th31r dr34ms 4g41nst th3m."

Terezi placed the noose around the salamander's neck.

"Sollux...w)(at's Terezi doing?"

"Puniithhiing the wiicked."

"By lync)(ing it?!"

Terezi pulled the salamander along the floor by the noose until she found an overhanging rock that she could toss the loose end of the rope over.

"You 4r3 gu1lty of m4ny th1ngs."

"Sollux, stop)(er!"

"Why?"

"You 4r3 gu1lty of murd3r."

She tossed the rope and caught the free end as it looped around the rock above. She slowly started to pull the rope, dragging the salamander along and up into the air.

"T)(is is wrong Sollux and you know it!"

"You 4r3 gu1lty of k1dn4pp1ng th3 1nnoc3nt."

"Why iith thiith wrong Fef?"

"You 4r3 gu1lty of th3 consumpt1on of th3 corps3s of s3nt13nt b31ngs."

The salamander's feet left the ground. It started to kick furiously and scratch at the noose.

"Because t)(is is not)(ow justice is served! T)(is is not)(ow the system works!"

"You 4r3 gu1lty of th3 corrupt us3 of 1l13g4l m4g1cs."

"How doeth the thythtem work Fef? Iith iit the thame one that routiinely letth thcum liike thiith loothe iinto the world tho they can harm otherth agaiin?"

"You 4r3 gu1lty of th3 murd3r of no l3ss th4n thr33 l4w 3nforc3m3nt off1c3rs 1n th3 1l1n3 of duty."

The salamander spasmed furiously as it choked. It's yellow skin darkening ominously.

"Yes it is! But at least it keeps t)(ose w)(o c)(oose to follow it in line and let's us proudly claim we are better t)(an t)(ose t)(at glubbing DON'T!"

"Why doeth that matter Fef? Why thould we thhackle ourthelveth to claiim we are better than thothe thcum?"

Feferi closed her eyes and screamed in rage and grief.

"Because the way you two are acting, you mig)(t as well be criminals! I)(ate you bot)(so muc)(rig)(t now! You're denying t)(e people of Teapot t)(eir chance to see justice served by do t)(is!"

Feferi glared at both of the cops who had stopped and stared at her. The salamander was still hanging in the air, the thing's kicks and twists weakening as it slowly choked.

"But, th1s...th1s TH1NG corrupt3d my dr34ms, us3d th3m 4g41nst M3!"

"T)(e consort did t)(e same to me as well!"

Feferi stalked over to Terezi, who was shaking with anger and still holding tightly to the rope. The sea troll grabbed Terezi's face and leaned in close to talk to her.

"Let me guess...it corrupted your dreams about true love. It twisted your)(appiness into c)(ains t)(at you freely put on of your own will.

T)(e salamander corrupted your)(appiness and you want revenge."

"Y3s."

"W)(at makes you glubbing t)(ink t)(at it didn't do t)(e same to M-E w)(en it snatc)(ed me from the cabin last nig)(t?"

Feferi held Terezi's face in front of her own and looked deep into the blind officer's glasses.

"T)(is t)(ing used my love for Sollux against me. And most likely used w)(atever Sollux feels for me against)(im."

"Th3n you should b3 ch33r1ng m3 on d4mm1t 4nd not l3ctur1ng m3 4bout wh4t 1s r1ght!"

"W)(at makes you t)(ink t)(at it didn't do t)(e same to eac)(and every person in Teapot? S)(ould we go and drag t)(em her so t)(ey can watc)(t)(e brave Alternian cops string up t)(is salamander? S)(ould we let t)(em know t)(is is)(ow justice works now?"

Feferi slapped the rope from Terezi's hands, the salamander dropped to the floor with a loud thump, it gasped for air heavily before passing out yet again.

"Not if I)(ave anyt)(ing to say about it."

Feferi jabbed a finger into Terezi's chest, pushing her back against the wall. Sollux started to approach her from behind, probably seeking to hold her back. Feferi turned her head slightly to let him see the corners of her eyes and fanged mouth.

"YOU FUCKING TOUC)(M-E I'LL R-END YOU LIMB FROM GLUBBING LIMB."

He found himself backed up against the opposing wall. Terrified at the purple-blooded troll who had his partner suspended above the floor with a mere finger.

"T)(e people of Teapot WILL see justice Officer Terezi Pyrope of t)(e Alternia City Police Department."

"But it will be according to t)(e system t)(at is in place."

"T)(e system t)(at makes us better t)(an t)(e scum t)(at t)(reaten us."

"NOT YOUR VIGILANTISM!"

Feferi pulled back and let Terezi drop to the ground. The officer clutched in pain at the spot Feferi had jabbed her finger and gasped for air. Sollux slowly peeled himself off the wall and circled around Feferi, trying to reach his partner.

"Fef...we're thorry.

We'll let the local courtth handle thiith..."

He made his way to Terezi, keeping the heavily breathing, furious woman he thought he knew in sight.

"You okay, Tthhii?"

"Oh j3gus th4t hurt. No blood 1t sm3lls l1k3, but my ch3st 1s go1ng to b3 sor3 for w33ks."

Sollux helped Terezi to her feet and leaned her up against the wall. Feferi just continued to glare at them.

"Okay, II'm jutht going to uthe the ropeth to tie up the conthort. IIth that alriight?"

He walked slowly over to the unconcious consort, holding his hands out like he was being covered by an angry gun-toting thug who had a hostage.

"Are you okay wiith that Miithh Feferii Peiithketh?"

Feferi reacted to that simple sentence like a fully loaded freight train had just slammed into her. She snapped from her rage with a gasp of pure agony.

"O)(...o)(gog...w)(at..."

Sollux continued to stare at her like he was dealing with a hostage situation.

"II'm jutht going to tie the perp up tho we can take hiim back to town. IIth that alriight Mitth Peiktheth?"

Feferi clasped her hands to her mouth and fell to her knees.

"Please...please...stop calling me t)(at Sollux..."

Sollux continued to stare her down as he tied up the salamander. When he was done with that, he stood up and walked over to the now sobbing mayor's aide.

"O)(gog...w)(at did I do? I ruined it all...I ruined w)(at we)(ad...I'm so sorry..."

Violet tears poured her face, staining her blouse and falling to the cavern floor where they left purple muddy splotches.

Sollux kneeled down next to her and just wrapped his arms around her. He closed his eyes and tried not to cry himself.

"You don't need to apologithe Fef...you're not the one who needth to be thorry."

Terezi walked over the tied up Salamander and lifted it from the ground, grunting as her chest hurt from the strain. Sollux pulled Feferi to her feet and let her head fall onto his shoulder. She dug her fingers deeply into his sides, he grunted in pain from the intense pressure, but he was okay with it.

"Terethii and mythelf are the oneth who thhould apologiithe for what happened."

"II'm thorry for thiith...II'm thorry...pleathe forgiive me Fef..."

"1 l3t my 4ng3r g3t out of control. 1...1'm sorry..."

Sollux laughed.

"Look at what you've done Fef. You've made Terethii apologiithe for thomethiing."

Feferi looked up at them, sniffing. Terezi started to cackle as she walked passed the two towards what smelled like fresh air.

"Fiirtht tiime that'th ever happened. You've worked a miiracle."

Feferi started to giggle and then hugged Sollux tightly.

"I love you too muc)(Sollux. I love you I love you I love you."

"II love you too you Thiilly fiithh. Now let'th get the glub out of here."

With that the two followed Terezi as she led the way out the cave through a different tunnel than the one they entered. When they reached the cave's exit, the three stopped and stared at what awaited them.

A cow. A whole field full of them. All looking intently at the people who just walked out of the dark hole in the ground.

Sollux screamed.

Feferi started to laugh maniacally as his fish puns sank in.

Terezi laughed just because.

They stayed in Teapot for several more days as they attended a trial in which the salamander was found guilty of the innumerable crimes committed against the town. They got to see the town relax as justice was truly served. They watched as a armored van from The Veil arrived in town to take away the criminal consort for storage in one of the deepest pits within the prison island's horrifying depths.

They left the following morning for home.

Terezi sprawled across the back seat, windows rolled down, taking in the various scents that drifted in over their four hour trip. She smiled as she listened to Sollux and Feferi happily sing along to some horrifically cheesy romantic rock ballads. They made a nice duet.

Maybe one day they'd realize that it was more important than anything else in the city...no, the world. One day they'd realize that the views of the few remaining noble houses from the Old World didn't matter anymore.

Let those backwards assholes have their scandal over a member of one of their most

presitigious houses falling in love and maybe, just maybe, one day marrying a proud member of the APD who happened to have mustard-colored blood.

Maybe one day Sollux and Feferi would realize that, get this game they played over with and just admit their love to the world and each other.

Terezi hoped it was rather soon...

"H3H3H3H3"

"What are you laughiing about now?"

"Oh, noth1ng, noth1ng 4t 4ll."

she had a rather large bet on a date about two months from now.

Later, deep within the Consort Pits of The Veil Maximum Security Prison. A consort sat and fumed.

It had gained the fear of the others by brutally murdering and devouring the largest and strongest consort there days after its arrival. They stayed away from the salamander now.

Now, it just sat and waited. Watching everyone. Hating everyone.

Then it heard a voice.

"hELLO THERE."

"Huh?"

"i BELIEVE YOU ARE KNOWN AS, uH, cASEY vON sALAMANCER, wOULD THAT BE CORRECT?"

"Who this?"

"yOU MAY CALL ME pUPA, mR pUPA, aND, uH, i HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU."

"The Getaway" by Decker

"Whoa man, It's like the glass shows you the TRUTH about life." Gamzee was sitting on the floor of a jewelry shop, squinting into a large gemstone and turning it slowly.

"Did is say that you're a moron? Put it in the bag and hurry up."

"It like, shows you that, that, everything changes, you know? Whoa that is a ritzy looking...crown thing."

"It's called a tiara. Don't touch it. It's set on a pressure aw fuck." Karkat pinched the bridge of his nose as the alarm went off. Gamzee stood there holding the tiara with a guilty look on his face.

"Gamzee, when I was the last time I told you how stupid you were?"

"Uh...I think it was this morning when, like, you just got up and then..."

"SHUT THE FUCK UP AND GET TO NEPETA!" Karkat yelled as he shoved him out the door.

"Where did you park her anyway?"

"Just around the corner my best bro!"

"Well at least you did something right." Karkat said as they turned the corner. They saw Nepeta standing there.

"What are you waiting around for Nepeta! Lets go!"

Nepeta forlornly, and with great effort, held up her foot. There was something orange hanging from it. Karkat facepalmed.

"Oh my God our getaway ride got clamped. Gamzee, is your thinkpan so fried that you can't read a "No standing" sign."

"Uh...she wasn't standing when I parked her. She was on like...all fours with wheels and shit."

Karkat looked back and saw familiar blue and red lights flashing off the walls.

"Forget it. I'll take the cash. You grab Nepeta. We'll take her over to the auto shop on Fifth."

"Roger fuckin' dodger my bro."

*

"I feel like a fucking idiot Terezi. When are you going to get our light fixed?"

Sollux was currently sitting on the front seat, poking his head out the window. His eyes were flashing.

"Got to give your all for the force Sollux!" Terezi grinned. "Now come on! I want to hear a siren! That broke too."

"Oh fuck that. The siren works fine."

"Okay you big grub." Terezi reached over and flipped a switch.

"Jegus fuck!" Sollux yelled as the siren went off right in his ear.

"Oh look, the lights do work." Terezi said in a cherubic tone. Sollux gave her a dirty look.

"Why do I let you drive again? Wait! I just saw someone run down that ally!"

"Damn. It will take us a couple minutes to get around the block. Hang on!"

Sollux's knuckled turned white as Terezi slammed on the accelerator.

*

Hearts Boxcars, owner of HB's Completely Legal Body and Collision Shop sighed as

two figures ran into the garage, carrying a third. He put down his latest copy of Red Cheeks.

"What do you lunatics want?"

"We need you to take off a clamp!"

"Fine, where's the car?"

Gamzee turned around and showed him Nepeta's foot.

"...I well never get over how fucked up that is Nepeta."

"Hi Boxcars! How the dating site going?" Nepeta waved.

"Lovely. Droogs, get the angle grinder will you?"

They flopped Nepeta on a worktable with a clang while a well dressed dersite walked over with some very large power tools.

"Hold still, or I might cut your foot of."

"Whoa man. How do power tools work!? Fuckin' miracles is how."

"Shut up, or I might cut YOUR foot off."

Gamzee gave a sad honk.

It took a few minutes of fidgeting and very loud noise before the clamp clattered to the ground.

"Thanks. You know who to send the bill to." Karkat waved

"Get lost."

"Bye Boxcars!" Nepeta smiled "Remember we gotta set up that couples chat room thing!"

"Get lost!"

"Getting lost!" Nepeta grinned.

Hearts Boxcars lost sight of three trolls running out the garage door. He saw two trolls in a blue and green car out of his office window, going down the side road.

*

"There they go!" Sollux pointed. Terezi pulled out of the parking lot they were staking out and peeled out after them.

"They're going towards the warf!" Sollux yelped. "They just cut left!"

Terezi yanked the wheel hard and slid flawlessly around the corner. Sollux looked ill. They managed see the tiny car drive along the side of one of the warehouses towards the water.

"Hehehe. That's a dead end they have nowhere to..." Terezi stopped.

The tiny car cut left again and tumbled right in the water.

"...uh-oh."

"Oh my god that is going to be like three feet of paperwork."

They slowly pulled the car up to the edge of the dock. They got out and looked at the rippling water.

"No bubbles. It's like they just vanished." Sollux said quietly.

"Huh."

"..."

"..."

"I'm hungry. Want to hit that Chinese place and forget this ever happened?"

"Yeah, okay."

*

Karkat waited a full minute after the car drove away, treading water underneath the dock.

"Okay, I think they're gone."

"I'm wet!" Nepeta grouched. "I hate getting wet!"

"Have you ever, like, really looked at a starfi..."

"You got the bag Gamzee?" Karkat snapped.

"Wha...Oh. Yeah. Right here bro." Gamzee held up a soggy bag.

"Lets get this shit back to Pupa. I'm fucking tired and cold."

"I'm weeeeettt!"

"Then get out of the fucking water!"

"Heireditary" by MindMessiah

dave, have you ever thought about starting a family?
what

For once, you manage to startle Dave a little, as he gags on his beer and replaces it on its coaster before looking at you like you just asked to drink some of his urine. The two of you are sat together in one of Alternia City's numerous bars, catching a drink together in the short gap between working your arses off in the day and helping save the city from nefarious criminals at night. Your lemonade is sat nearly untouched in front of you, but Dave's beer is already about half-full, standing proudly next to the two other empty pint glasses of his. Sometimes you get the feeling that Dave drinks a little more than he really should - but he'd never let you raise the issue and anybody else would flip the fuck out upon you mentioning this, so you let it slide.

dude what the fuck are you talking about
you know - settling down, getting married, having kids...
i know what you meant
im not retarded
but thats a fucking stupid question
really?
why do you think that?
because our line of work is gogdamn dangerous
i learnt the hard way that raising a kid while pissing off every major gang in the city is bad for your health
and forgive me if i dont think family life is that great
coming home to find out that your bros come out of the closet while your mom is shagging your friends dad isnt exactly therapeutic
oh man, i almost forgot about that.
sorry about bringing it up.
nah its cool
i got over it a long time ago
besides with your dad boning my mom we might as well be literal bros now
ha ha, yeah!
brother from another mother!

You extend a bro fist buncp to Dave over the table, who returns it before taking another swig of his beer.

so why are you asking about this
you dont usually just spring something like this on me
have you got your eye on someone
need the advice of this casanova here
no, no, nothing like that!
to tell you the truth, i was actually thinking about adoption.
seriously
yeah!
so, the other day i was asking around the orphanage, seeing if there was anything they

needed help with, and... well, there was one little consort who no-one seemed to be talking to.
i went over to talk to her, but i don't speak salamander, and she didn't speak english, so we couldn't have much of a conversation.
but i asked the owner what her name was, and guess what she was called!
what
casey!
why the fuck is that relevant
oh, come on!
don't tell me you've forgotten con air already - we only saw it again last week!
and i have been trying to forget it ever since
but yeah i remember that casey was the little girl
im just wondering why that makes this consort so special
i mean if youre so desperate to adopt you couldve just walked in there and played fucking eenie meenie miney mo
i guess.
but she looked so lonely, and with a name like that...
i just felt like someone was trying to tell me something.
sure it sounds stupid, but i'd rather have a flimsy reason than no reason at all.
well if you want a brat of your own then im not going to stop you
suppose that means youre going to have to retire as the heir though
thats a right kick in the balls
what?
the streets are dangerous enough with three superheroes on patrol
knock that down to two and im going to have to start looking for a sidekick
and ive got enough in my grill without people noticing that i keep a little kid in spandex locked in the house
no, i meant what was that about retiring as the heir?
i'm not going to just give up!
like you said, the city needs heroes!
so youre not adopting
why do you think these things are mutually exclusive?
i can fight crime and raise a kid at the same time!
putting aside the fact that you couldnt raise a loaf of bread
theres a reason most comic book heroes dont have families
theyre targets

Dave pushes his beer to the side of the table and leans over, lowering his voice to the point where you have to strain to hear him. His expression remains inscrutable behind his shades, but you swear his tone of voice has become more sincere and almost aggressive.

listen to me egbert
i know you think crimefighting is some big game that lets you use those weird ass birth defects you have
but it fucking well isnt
people die doing this job
every criminal in this city wants you and me dead
and theyll take any advantage they can get

they dont give a shit about who they kill
your family
your friends
all of them are fair game when criminal mcthief comes around
do you know what its like to watch the guy who raised you your entire life bleed to
death in front of you with nothing you can do to stop it and nothing you can do to hurt
the fucker responsible

...
i didnt think so
so you might want to think twice before bringing a kid into this shit
got it

Though you can't see his eyes, you get the feeling that Dave is giving you a particularly intense glare. He's got a point - superheroism can get dangerous at times. You remember the one time you got shot twice in the chest. Not fun. And Dave's had it infinitely worse, having no special powers whatsoever and taking up the mantle of Seppucrow over the corpse of its previous owner. Maybe taking in a daughter while you're still fighting crime is going to come back to bite you in the ass in the long run.

But somehow, you still feel unfulfilled. No matter how many criminals you put away and how many lives you save, Alternia City seems determined to keep the crime rates high and the quality of life low. There's no real indication that you're doing anything to make a difference, and your house is as quiet and empty as always every time you return home. You need something to tell you that you're making some sort of impact on the city, one bright, smiling soul who's life you've improved to raise you up after a night of failure.

yeah...
it's just that, like you said, there's not much reason for me to be a superhero at the moment.
aside from wanting to help people and putting the windy thing to use, i don't have any real motivation.
but let's face it, this city is pretty awful.
there's a lot of bad people running around, and not enough good people to keep them in check.
and that's the city those kids have got to grow up in.
but i have a chance to make life better for one of them.
while i can't fix things for everyone, i can at least look to casey and remind myself that i'm still helping.
to remind me what i'm fighting for, and what the cost will be if i fail.
so...
that's the reason, i guess.

Wow, you were not expecting to say something like that. Even Dave looks rather taken aback at your little speech. But it's all true. You need somebody to keep you anchored, to remind you that policing the streets is a serious task that will have grave consequences should you fail, and to provide you with hope whenever times are looking their darkest. Taking a small sip of your lemonade, you look back at Dave, who has managed to conceal his brief moment of surprise beneath the expressionless mask

that covers his face once again.

i have to say
i wasnt expecting you to come out with something like that
nor was i, to be honest.
look
i know i cant tell you how to live your life
if you want a kid running around then thats your choice
i just dont want you to come home one night and find her multilated corpse
dave!
what
im just telling it like it is
well, don't!
you know as well as i do that i would never let something like that happen!
just remember
theres some things you cant prevent

With that ominous warning, he grabs his beer from the end of the table where he left it, and downs the rest of it in one. Slamming his glass back on the table, he gestures to the nearest waitress and points to his depleted drink. She takes the hint, and fetches him another beer from the taps at the bar, sliding it down the table and into his hand. He gives a small nod, before turning back to you and bringing his shades down to the bridge of his nose. With his bright red eyes looking straight into yours, he continues the conversation in a... different direction.

so youre going through all the stress of having a kid without actually banging anybody
what the fuck is the point in that

"Birds Of A Feather" by Wigmund

The Don of the Strider Mafia was not one to put off by strange shit coming from the past or future. Hell, half the time it was himself and something he was dragging along coming in for a visit. A veritable fucking party of temporal shenanigans going non-stop for him.

But this...this freaked him out. Worse than that time a dog with his face popped up for a short time and then disappeared. After that he had steeled himself for more strange shit, but this just took the cake.

Standing in front of him was CrowBro...but that wasn't right. He was CrowBro.

And this one had boobs. Rather nice ones he thought. But still, boobs did not belong on CrowBro.

Don Strider and a half dozen time-clones were gathered in one of their many warehouses in the Foundry searching through some damn fine shit they had just snagged from the Kingpin. They were having a mighty fine time trying to find their intended target when there was a pop and CrowBoobs appeared.

And for the past minute they have all been frozen, staring at each other.

Sighing to himself, he figured he had to break the ice. He had shit to do multiple times today.

"Nice costume gal, but I'm sorry to tell you it's not Halloween. That was a couple of months ago, enjoyed it several times myself this year."

He walked up cautiously to the imposter taking note of what he saw. She seemed to be about his height and was wearing a suit that looked a lot like his own CrowBro suit, but those were easy enough to obtain at any costume shop. Her suit seemed to be a silvery formfitting and obviously armor plated bodysuit complimented with dark brown gloves and thigh-high boots plus lighter brown helmet and cape-wings. She had a belt on brandishing his crow-head symbol. As he got close, her hand dropped to a flashlight on her belt.

"No need to whip out your flashlight sis. I'm just going to escort you out of the building so me and my associates may complete our little shindig here before we have to attend another gig."

He had barely reached out for the chick when she kneed him in the crotch.

Hard.

Several of his time clones winced in pain. Remembered pain for those that were him repeating this loop in different roles, the rest sympathetic.

Don Strider collapsed to the ground, grasping himself and trying not to throw up from

the pain.

Oh fuck that hurt.

Oh fuck she pulled out a flashlight.

Oh fuck that's not a flashlight.

Don Strider stared up at the chick who was doing a damn fine impression of CrowBro and raised his eyebrows in pain and confusing trying to ask 'Who the fuck are you and why did you feel the need to ruin my future chances of having children?' Unfortunately except for the first part that question was hard, even for Dave Strider, to convey through lovely eyebrow waggling.

Some of the time clones meanwhile had circled CrowBoobs and had pulled out some weapons. The ones he knew were himself in a couple of hours had pulled back and were watching from behind some heavy shit.

Oh fuck.

It was over quick. Well, at least for the chick it was. To Don Strider it seemed an eternity as he got to watch her go through themselves like they were a bunch of drunken consorts armed with wiffle bats.

She slashed two of the six clones that rushed her with the sword-thing, going through the like they were butter. No blood though, must have been a hot weapon, he thought numbly. The next Dave received a series of horrifyingly painful yet beautifully delivered kicks that sent him down. Number four was behind her, but he ended up fairing no better as the one before him. Five and Six figured that going close in was suicide so they went for their handguns, not Dave's personal style, but sometimes you just faced shit that needed shooting, but they didn't have time to pull the guns as suddenly the bitch was on top of them.

Don Strider's eyes widened in terror as he knew what the fuck had happened. She fucking time displaced herself.

His eyes got even larger as he watched her grab his two last paradox clones and did something horrible to them.

He had never thought of using his time powers like that...he never would. What he just saw was so horrifying that he never would.

CrowBoobs dropped the corpses and walked up to the prone Dave and lifted him effortlessly so he was level with her visor.

Damn thing was tinted just like his was. He would love to find out who she was.

"I travel back in time and this is what I find?"

Dave smirked at her, regaining his composure somewhat.

"Find all kinds of strange shit doing that. What's upsetting you babe?"

"I travel back and find the man I spent my life looking up to was nothing more than a common criminal?!"

"Nobody's perfect, not even myself."

Boobs pulled Dave in close, he could hear her snarling inside the helmet.

"I expected better from the man who trained me."

"Oh-"

"From my own father."

"-what the fuck."

Her father? Wait...that meant that she was...

"Yeah, she's our daughter," one of his time repeating selves yelled from cover.

"What."

The woman dropped him to the ground and paced away in frustration.

"You're my daughter? I trained you?"

Dave got up, dusted himself off and rubbed the bridge of his nose as he tried to organize the sudden in-flow of what-the-fuck thoughts.

"Okay, I think I need an explanation. Would you care to provide one dear?"

No sneaky shit on my part. Truce?"

She turned towards him, glared again - she's good at that through the visor, he taught her well - and then sighed.

"Fine. What do you want me to explain to you?"

"Well...everything. Like who you are, when and where you came from and who the hell your mother is."

"You never told me who my mother was."

"Well, if you took off the helm-"

"And you're not going to find out."

"Oh. Well then. That's fine. Could you answer questions one and both parts of number two?"

The woman paced back and forth as she started to explain relevant story details. He followed as best as he could, but there was a ton of shit.

She was the Magpie. What the hell - Raven would have sounded cool...wait, that one's overused by horrible fiction writers. But surely there was a better bird that she could have named herself after.

And she was his daughter from roughly thirty years in the future.

Or a possible future. Apparently someone had gotten ahold of something with horrifically bad juju. No one knew who when she was from, maybe it was Mr Pupa, maybe it was the Midnight Crew, it even could have been the military. But everyone knew the results.

They opened the Gates to someplace bad. Really bad. Beyond horrorterror bad. And naturally, everything there thought it was a fucking great time to throw the best party

ever at their new neighbor's place. Pity it was destroying reality.

So during this time of incredible shittiness, Dave had trained his daughter and sent her back to prevent it. And now she was here, facing the realization that Daddy had a spotty past.

Wonderful.

"So if you're here to stop this shit from going down, why did you seek me out and kick me in the balls?"

Raven walked up to Dave and glared at him again. Damn she was good at that. So was he though.

"I don't know now."

"What was your original intention?"

"I thought you were going to be helpful, but now I see your nothing more than a vain criminal. Hell, I imagine CrowBro was nothing more than another way to gather attention for yourself."

"HEY! That's not why-"

"You fucking sicken me 'father'. Good bye."

And with that she flew out a window. She actually flew. Damn, he wished he could do that as CrowBro.

But fuck, he had a lot to think about now.

And an excuse to take it easy on the lady front for a good long time. Damn, that really hurt.

The Magpie left the Strider warehouse enraged. She silently flew across a city that she had never seen in one piece before. It was beautiful. Almost as beautiful as her father had told her.

The city she knew was in the process of being ripped into some other reality. Ruins dotted that one with what few survivors that were left spending more time preying upon each other than trying to futilely fight the things that came through the gate.

She was going to make sure that never happened.

Normally that would have meant she was a doomed paradox, but her actions this night had splintered the time line in unexpected ways.

She was here to stay.

Magpie landed somewhere in the area her father had called The Lost District and she found a somewhat undamaged building that was miraculously free of squatters to set up in. She checked the place out and was relieved to find that it still had power and water. Excellent.

She got what few supplies she had pulled along with her from the future besides her suit and equipment set up in the ruin.

She went into the bathroom, removed her helmet, shook out her black hair and smiled at her reflection.

"If my own father will not protect this city, then it is up to me."

She turned and looked out at the city's glow. From here she could see the skyline of the Glass City and City Central.

"And the scum that plague this beautiful city will never figure out what hit them."

"One For Sorrow" by Wigmund

The various dark alleyways that make up most of The Settlements are normally places one would associate with having a picnic. But for the Karkat Gang, who grew up in these very alleys when they weren't bouncing around from orphanage to orphanage and shelter to shelter, these were the playgrounds of their youth.

Karkat himself didn't like returning to the past due to painful memories of barely scratching out existence while supporting his two friends, but he did it for Nepeta. Nepeta loved the alleys. She loved prowling around them pretending that she was a jungle cat loose in the city, hunting vermin and playing with her fellow feral city wildlife. And though he wouldn't admit it, he loved to watch her having fun, being young and free without worries about what crazy bullshit Mr. Pupa was going to send them on next.

Gamzee...well, Gamzee just enjoyed being with his two best motherfucking friends in the world.

Karkat smiled as he watched Nepeta crawl around a bunch of dumpsters that blocked any view of the Gang having this picnic from the nearby street. But, they had food that needed eating. After pulling that heist in Fort Skaian Mr. Pupa had given them some time off and a nice paycheck. Karkat was able to fix up their apartment, get some utilities for the year and a stable food budget, plus they had enough for special occasions.

Special occasions like Nepeta's birthday.

So Karkat had grabbed some of this 'Southern-style Barbeque' from a restaurant Nepeta drooled at everytime they passed it and then they let her pick where they had their party. She picked this alleyway, the one where they had all met for the first time and Karkat had decided he was going to protect the two fools.

She was so excited. She had never seen so much meat together on one plate before. There was beef brisket, pulled pork, shredded chicken and various other bits and cuts of those same animals. Plus Karkat had splurged and grabbed tons of the sides - baked potatoes, coleslaw, baked beans and so on. He had never heard of half the foods he saw on the menu in that place, so he wanted them to try it all. It looked delicious...and it was.

After they ate their fill, they had carefully packed up the leftovers. Waste not, want not. And then Karkat and Gamzee sat back to watch Nepeta at play.

Everything was going great.

Until they heard someone else in the alleyway.

"One is for Sorrow."

Karkat stood up and started to look around.

"NEPETA! GET BACK OVER HERE! WE HAVE COMPANY."

Nepeta bounded over to Karkat and looked around.

":33 < *The Lioness looks around curiously, for she wants to know who their new furiend is*"

"Nepeta..."

"Two is for Mirth."

This time the voice was directly above them. Karkat looked up but saw nothing.

"ThIs Is SoMe FuCkInG fReAkY-aSs ShIt."

Gamzee pushed their leftovers into a safe spot...had to protect the food...and stood next to Karkat and Nepeta.

"Three is for a Funeral."

The was a rush of air by the trio. Still they saw nothing.

":?? < Who are you? Did you come for my birthday?"

"Shut up Nepeta. I don't think our guest is here for that."

"Four is for a Birth."

":DD < I love babies! Where's the birth!?"

"Nepeta - Shut Up!"

"ThIs FuCkInG ShIt Is BlOwInG mY cOoL gUyS..."

"Five is for Heaven."

Again, the voice was above the group. Karkat looked up and saw someone.

CrowBro? No...different color suit...and this one had boobs.

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU BITCH!? WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

The newcomer just looked down upon the three from the rooftop.

"Six is for Hell."

The not-CrowBro reached down to her belt and pulled something from it - a flashlight?

Karkat watched as the flashlight became one of those energy swords he saw in previews for those sci-fi flicks. Oh shit.

":((< Karkitty...what's happening?"

Karkat pulled out his sickles, prompting the other two to pull their weapons as well.

"Someone wants to crash the party Nepeta."

The woman jumped down into the alleyway and watched the three, she readied her sword.

"Seven's for the Devil himself."

And with that she charged them. Karkat readied himself to try, futilely, to block the woman's sword.

But then Nepeta pounced at her as she sped towards them, claws fully extended.

And Karkat watched, horrified as the birdgirl slashed off Nepeta's claws and then...and then...slashed open her belly.

Karkat dropped to his knees and screamed in rage and sorrow. The woman stopped her charge and turned towards Nepeta. The catgirl got up to her feet, reached a hand

down to her stomach and brought it back up to see green blood. She turned to face her friends and stared at them with empty eyes.

"Kar...kitty?"

And then she collapsed, blood pooling around her.

The fucking bitch who cut her open turned slowly to face the other two.

"Prepare to join your friend scum."

"WHAT THE FUCK DID WE DO TO YOU?!"

"What did you not do? You're thieves. You're murderers.

You stole the food you were just eating - didn't you?"

Karkat looked back the veritable trove of food they had left over.

"You...you just assume that since we were in an alleyway eating decent food, we must have stolen it?"

"ThAt KiNd Of ShIt MaKeS aSsEs OuT oF yOu AnD mE."

"Gamzee. Shut your hole."

"KaY."

The woman walked towards them, energy sword held at the ready, and glared at Karkat.

"If you didn't steal the food, then you probably stole the money. If you didn't steal the money, you probably committed a crime to gain it."

"FUCK YOU BITCH! You may be correct about where we got the money from - but what FUCKING REASON would that give you to go around cutting us up?"

"I am here to clean this city. I am here to keep it safe."

Karkat stepped towards the woman, they were an arm's length apart.

"AND WE DO WHAT WE NEED TO SURVIVE!"

"Liar..."

"I GUESS YOU HAVEN'T BEEN IN TOWN LONG ENOUGH TO NOTICE, BUT IT'S A SHITTY PLACE. IF YOU'RE ON TOP, THE WORLD'S GREAT!"

Karkat paused and looked around their old home.

"But if you're homeless and poor, this is what you have to look forward to."

The woman didn't move.

"We do, what we need to, to survive."

He was trying desperately to keep his rage under control, can't say something and join Nepeta down there on the ground.

Oh god Nepeta, please be alive.

"I...I..."

"I guess you're one of the lucky ones. You never had to fight for survival. I can tell by that fancy suit you're wearing. Too much fancy shit for a poor crazy."

"Shut up! YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I WENT THROUGH!"

They both stepped back from each other. The woman out of shock at losing her composure, Karkat due to the fucking freaky-ass way her voice went from obviously feminine to somewhat gravelly to demon that had been gargling acid in one sentence.

"Yes, we committed a crime to gain the money we had. We need it to stay off the streets."

Karkat pointed to his fallen friend. He saw her shift a bit. Still alive, thank gog.

"But today we were just celebrating her birthday."

He walked up to the woman so they were face-to-darkened helmet.

"If anyone deserves to be cut down her. It's me.

I'm the one who led Gamzee and Nepeta into this live of crime."

He teared up, in fear for his friends, and for himself.

"I DID IT SO WE COULD LIVE! AND THEN I FOUND OUT THAT I HAD MADE A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL HIMSELF, SO I HAD TO PULL THESE TWO IN WITH ME."

Karkat spread out his arms and braced himself.

"SO CUT ME DOWN! PLEASE!"

The woman stepped back, stumbled over Nepeta who cried, face down into the alleyway's dirt, in pain and shock and fear.

"I...I...I didn't know."

Now the woman sounded like a small, frightened girl. Someone who had done something wrong and was facing the consequences for the first time.

"As my stupid sopor-addled friend said, 'assume' just makes an ass out of you and me."

Karkat leveled a sickle at the woman and looked at her with burning rage.

"And now, I'm going to make you pay for hurting Nepeta."

There was a police siren coming from the street at the alley's mouth. The woman looked past Karkat, down to Nepeta and then at the angry troll.

"No...I...I'm sorry."

And with that she disappeared. Literally.

"What the fuck ith goiing on down here?"

"1 sm3ll b4rb3qu3 4ppl3b3rry.

B4rb3qu3 4nd..."

Karkat turned to see Officers Captor and Pyrope walking towards them. Fuck. But wait, Terezi looked worried.

"G3t on th3 horn, Sollux. W3'v3 got som3on3 who n33ds 4n 4mbul4nc3."

Sollux looked at her but she just ran towards Nepeta's body.

"C4LL 1T NOW! N3P3T4'S DY1NG!"

Karkat, Gamzee and Officer Terezi Pyrope all leaned over the fallen girl as Terezi carefully rolled her over to check out her wounds.

Nepeta opened her dirt-encrusted eyes and looked up at them. She feebly reached up and stroked the police officer's hair.

":33 < Oh look, Miss Pyrope is here fur my purrty...hello..."

And then she passed out again.

Karkat sat in the waiting room outside the emergency room of Alternia General and worried.

Nepeta had been in there for hours. He had Gamzee go back to their apartment to

store the food and wait there. No need to have Gamzee here freaking out, he could numb himself with sopor back home. It was better that way.

Karkat should be the only one to wait for news on his friend.

After a what seemed like an eternity, a cop walked up to him. It was Terezi again.

"You got lucky K4rK4t."

"You fucking call this lucky?"

"1 do. Most crooks who 3nd up 1n front of th3 M4gp13 4r3n't lucky 3nough to b3 1n on3 p13c3 wh3n w3 f1nd th31r corps3s."

Karkat stared at Terezi. They had spent their early years living next to each other in what would become the Lost District. But after The Disaster, they lost track of each other. That was, until she had busted Karkat and his gang robbing a convenience store so they could get something to eat.

After that, she had taken it upon herself to keep an eye (or nostril) out on him and his friends. They were never close like they were before hand, but she made sure that he could slip by on the smaller stuff. But she also was there to punish him if he got in over his head.

But right now, she looked protective and worried about Karkat, about Nepeta.

"That's who that woman was - The Magpie?"

Karkat realized just how lucky he had gotten. Well he and Gamzee. Nepeta...

"N3p3t4 4s w3ll. Sh3's go1ng to b3 f1n3. Th3 docs st1tch3d h3r b4ck up 4nd sh3's r3cov3r1ng up r1ght now up st41rs."

"Can I...?"

"Go 4h34d. 1 h4v3 qu3st1ons for you 4bout wh4t w3nt down 4t Fort Sk414n, but th4t c4n w41t. Go k33p 4n 3y3 on N3p3t4 K4rk4t."

Terezi gave Karkat the room number and a pass to let him through the hospital and then she left. Karkat ran as fast he could, up gog knows how many flights of stairs and down the hallway to Nepeta's room.

Where he heard someone else inside.

"Eight is for a wish..."

Oh no...

Karkat slammed open the door to see the Magpie standing over Nepeta who was still out cold from the surgery.

The Magpie leaned over the injury girl and popped open her visor, Karkat couldn't see her face from this angle.

"Nine is for a kiss..."

She closed the visor and looked up at Karkat.

"I'm sorry about this. I truly am and I know there's no way I can ever take back what I

did..."

"You...I..."

She walked up to Karkat and opened her visor just a bit. He started to say something, but was interrupted by her giving him a quick kiss.

"Sometimes there are pearls to be found in the muck.

I seem to have found one of those pearls."

She turned to the open window she had apparently entered the room through, spread her wings and then flew off. Karkat just barely caught the last thing she said as she left.

"And Ten is for a Bird that you won't want to miss.

Karkat closed the window and went to sit beside Nepeta's bed. He checked her over, no new injuries and from the looks of it, the docs did a great job stitching her closed.

She'd have a lovely scar, but that was about it.

Then he saw something that the Magpie had left next to Nepeta.

A stuffed cat toy with a little brown bird in its mouth. Karkat smiled a bit and noticed that Nepeta had opened her eyes a bit and was looking at him.

":33 < The nice lady got me a birthday purrent Karkitty. She apologized for being so mean earlier and said it was all a misunderstanding."

Nepeta reached out for Karkat's hand, he took it and placed the cat doll next to her. They smiled at each other, Karkat desperately trying to not cry in front of Nepeta. He had to be strong for her.

Well, he smiled until Nepeta's loving smile turned into that cheshire grin that she wears while painting their apartment.

":33 < When I get home, I'm going to need more jelly to update the wall."

Oh gog dammit.

"Two For Pleasure" by Wigmund

Sure, he could have picked a better name for this costume...but Nepeta was just so fucking insistent about the name. He couldn't stand to see her use those big sad green eyes whenever she started begging for something. But after looking up the fucking critter in the library, The Weasel, seemed appropriate.

When he got a hold of something, he'd never let go.

Since Nepeta was down from their run-in with The Magpie and Karkat convinced Gamzee to keep watch to make sure she didn't start prowling around the apartment and end up ruining the stitching holding her guts in, he had the foreseeable future to himself. So it was time to take out his wrath on the rest of the thugs that populate Alternia City.

He smiled at the irony of him doing the exact same thing he was pissed at that woman over. That superhero in that tight costume that left little to the imagination...

...

"GODDAMMIT! FOCUS!"

The Weasel gripped his own head and tried to tear it off in frustration.

"That bitch tried to kill you and nearly killed Nepeta! You can't get all light headed just because she gave Nepeta that cat toy..."

He leaned forward and rested his head upon his arms on the edge of the rooftop he was on, smiling wistfully to himself.

"...and gave me that kiss..."

"BLUH!!"

He managed to clear his head enough that he started his patrol. This little artifact he found on one of the Gang's jobs did wonders for his strength, agility and durability. It was no effort to leap from rooftop to rooftop, and just as easy to use the sickle-clawed gauntlets to scurry down the sides of buildings to surprise those hiding in the shadowy alleyways.

The night progressed and he stopped several small crimes. Petty stuff usually. He did stop one rape - that guy wouldn't be doing anything with that part of his body ever again.

Karkat enjoyed doing that to that piece of shit. He even gave the woman the number to get ahold of Officer Terezi Pyrope and the APD's medical officer Kanaya whateverherlastnameis. Terezi likes dealing with rapists, she hangs them differently than everyone else.

Karkat found that he had wandered over to Alternia Island during his patrol, so he figured that he should cause some shit with one of the gangs over here - The Felt, The Kingpin's Mob, The Midnight Crew and the Strider Mafia. So many targets, so little time.

He took up watch at the Deadman's Corner, which made up the intersect of The Narrows, Old Town and The Foundry. There was an old grain silo that dominated the skyline for blocks around and was popular with most everyone in the area as both a watchtower and make-out point.

The Weasel looked up and sighed, thanks to the city lights, he couldn't see the stars. It was a clear night. During one of his crimes for Mr Pupa, Karkat had found himself miles away from Alternia City and for the first time, saw the night sky. Ever since then it had become something he wanted to see again. Maybe it was why he patrolled as the Weasel...just in case someone managed to blow the City's power so he could see the stars again.

He was distracted by this wishful thinking, so he didn't hear the footsteps approaching him from behind.

Hell, he didn't think anything was wrong until he saw the energy sword extend over his shoulder right next to his head.

The Weasel carefully turned around to find himself face mask to helmet with the Magpie.

"Is it not a truly wonderful night?"

Oh fuck.

"What...what are you doing here?"

He had no idea if she smiled inside her helmet, but the way she leaned in close and purred at him left little doubt.

"I'm dreadfully sorry.

I didn't realize there was a one vigilante limit to this rooftop, Mr...."

"Weasel. I'm the Weasel."

"Hmmmm...Well then, Weasel, I didn't realize there a vigilante limit here."

She walked away from him, swaying her hips. Oh god, he could make out everything back there...those wings just framed that view perfectly. He looked back across the city when she turned around and rested up against the other side of the roof's wall.

"Such a pity though, this location gives such a great view of Alternia Island."

"That's why I picked this spot."

"I just wonder why that rule doesn't apply to alllll those couples I see up here nightly."

She turned around again, leaning forward, thrusting that rump towards The Weasel.

"Oh...uh..."

Karkat's mind was a battlefield between the various factions of his mind: Oh god, compose yourself Karkat! But look at that ass! This bitch nearly killed Nepeta! Remember that kiss afterwards? She would have killed you if the cops hadn't showed up! Yeah, so, ass and nice tits and lovely lips. You're a stupid fuckass!

While Karkat had this mental debate, the Magpie noticed that he was having...difficulties. So she strode back over to the confused troll and leaned on him.

"Guhhh...."

"Something wrong?"

"No...no...I'm just wondering?"

She rubbed a finger on his chest and sighed. Thank gog for that reinforced codpiece.

"What?"

"What are you fucking doing here? Why are you doing this?"

The Magpie took a couple of steps back and whipped up her visor. Karkat's mind stopped working. She was...beautiful.

She batted her reddish eyes at the Weasel and pouted her lip at him.

"I'm a Magpie, I find it hard to resist shiny things I find.

Like pearls that are hidden in the muck."

Oh shit.

"What the fucking hell are you talking about?"

"How's the catgirl? Did she like the present I left for her?"

It looked like you enjoyed my gift to you before I left her room..."

The Magpie flashed him a devilish grin that went clear across her face.

"How did you know it was-?"

"The cutie from the alleyway that confronted me with the horrific truth about his life?"

She stopped smiling now and looked at him with a sympathetic frown.

"It's your voice...and to be honest, your costume really doesn't conceal your identity that well. Not many trolls have such nubby horns."

Karkat's hands whipped up to cover his horns and got ready to yell at the Magpie when she raised her hands and took his down.

"Which I find them incredibly cute."

He couldn't help himself, Karkat went into a full-body blush.

Which prompted the Magpie to giggle at him. Oh god, she made that simple sound sound so melodious and sexy. It melted him inside...except...oh thank you codpiece.

"You know, I've heard that Weasels are the same thickness from head to tail."

My gog that smile would earn any movie an NC-17 rating.

"Is it true?"

"Oh wow, look at the time...uhhhh...my night's done and I need to head back to base. That's right, head back to base."

"Really? Or are you just so flustered that you're going home so you can relieve some pressure?"

Sly smirk. Karkat sighed and took off his mask. She already knew who he was, so no loss. He wanted to tell her off and stop frustrating him all this innuendo. However, as soon as he took the mask off, she locked lips with him.

He thought about pulling away. He thought about what his reaction would have been if any other woman had done this to him. He wanted to tell her off...but what was he going to say now? But all he could do was wrap his arms around this wonderful, beautiful, crazy as fucking hell woman and enjoy the moment.

Eventually, they pulled away from each other. God that was good. She sighed and stroked his hair.

"I saw earlier that the Midnight Crew were moving some heavy weaponry into the Lost District to supply the Secret Wizards. Do you want to go cause so havoc?"
"Fuck yeah."

"S.E.E.ing Double, Part 1" by Redikalus

Sollux Captor was walking the streets of The Old Town, trailing the target of his latest investigation. Terezi was off helping with a manhunt for Karkat, so he has been alone for the last six days. The last four days have been tailing this flighty broad, and every once and a while she would just stand there and check this... watch thing? Yeah, let's call it a watch. It had been cloudy all day long and now Sollux was beginning to sense a light drizzle coming on. 2hiit. His current investigation was hard enough without the elements interfering.

His target turned and entered a small building with a bright red awning over its doorway. It was the Walk-In Washer, a fairly successful laundromat. But Sollux knew better, it was a front of the Strider Mafia. This could be the break he was looking for. Sollux leaned against the wall, under the awning, in between the window and the door and waited for about fifteen minutes for his target to come back out. When she did, she was with a prospitian who was helping her carry a few large packages. He turned towards the pair but was greeted before he could begin.

Good afternoon Mr. Captor.

Well, I guess it's not that good with this weather.

uh... 2ure...

m2 lalonde

are you aware that thii2 2tore ii2 run by the 2triider mafia?

Rose remained completely calm, retaining her polite smile. The prospitian seemed to fidget a little.

I am.

What of it, it's still a good place to get your laundry done.

there ii2 an ongoing iinve2tiigation iinto 2trider matter2 riight now
iim going to have to confirm the content2 of your package2

Rose remained ever stoic as she put down the package. The prospitian looked nervous... or not, Sollux could never tell with these carapaces. Either way, she didn't put down her package. Rose began unwrapping the folds of her package and pulled out a black dress.

You see? It's just innocent laundry, nothing sinister.

2orry, you'll have to 2how me all of iit.

Rose, still smiling, pulled out clothing after clothing, making a point of displaying them clearly to Sollux. Some of the clothes looked rather bizarre, but Rose was, admittedly, a strange woman. As she reached half way through the stack of clothes, it became obvious that some of the clothing was made for men.

care to explain thii2? Sollux asked pointing to the most recent article. Iit'2 clearly not your2.

Oh, yes. My friends, John and Jade, asked me to take some of their clothes in for cleaning with mine, and with Jade offering to pay, how could I refuse?

She let out a small laugh and continued cycling through the clothes. Once she finished going through her package, Rose nodded to the Prospitian, who reluctantly began to open her own package. Rose began to cycle through this stack of clothes. As Sollux watched, the clothes became more bizarre in general. Another oddity that Sollux noticed was that there were no underclothes, but he didn't find it that suspicious. Rose finished showing him all of the contents, which turned out to just be clothes.

Well officer? Were there any problems?

no, Sorry for the inconvenience, but it had to be sure.

Of course, I understand. Could you help me pack them back up?

Sollux obliged, he didn't really have a choice after forcing her to unload them in rainy weather. In a few minutes, the three of them had managed to pack them back up. Rose and the Prospitian picked up their respective packages.

Well, officer, may you have a good evening.

And with that, Rose and the Prospitian walked off. Sollux turned around and walked in the other way, no point in tailing her anymore for the day. Damn, he thought he had something with that.

Rose, the Seer, has been a staunch, invaluable ally of the APD for as long as she's been in the city. But recently, Sollux has been thinking there is a connection between her and the Strider Mafia. The Mafia's movements were strange and had no real pattern to them. Rose, however, implied that there was. How could she know? And then there was the theft of confiscated artifacts from the APD's vaults. That was one of the few cases that the Seer has abstained from aiding them with, despite the fact that the APD is certain that they were the source of many criminals' strange powers. Combine this with the fact that the Strider Mafia generally robs their victims of such artifacts over any other objective and it would seem that the Strider Mafia would be the prime suspects of the case.

But if there is any connection between Rose and the Strider Mafia, it was a well kept secret. Coincidences aside, even Terezi couldn't sniff anything sinister about this woman. But Sollux's instincts told him that there was a connection and Sollux trusted his instincts. Sollux sighed, maybe another day of observation would turn up something.

Rose arrived her apartment an hour later. She and the Prospitian set the boxes down just inside the door, Rose thanked the Prospitian for her time and dismissed her. As soon as the Prospitian left, Dave Strider walked out from his hiding place.

looks like the delivery went well

Mostly, I was stopped by Officer Captor.

that asshole is still following you

damn

did he suspect anything

No, I think he didn't realize that these clothes were anything special.

yeah

until recently even we didn't know that some artifacts were full on clothing

Rose began unpacking the clothing again, separating the clothes into four stacks: hers, John's, Jade's, and the artifacts. The four stacks were roughly equal in size.

I will have to thank Jade and John for the clothes, they helped to ease Sollux's suspicions.

you think he will keep following you

Yes, he didn't seem completely satisfied with my explanations.

damn

if he's stalking you

it throws a wrench in the plan for transfer

I have an idea for that, but Jade's the most likely to pull it off, I think.

Rose walked over to her phone. She lifted up the receiver and then removed a panel

on the back of the receiver. Within lied one of Rose's secure communicators. Rose pulled it out and called up Jade. Jade picked up almost immediately.

hi rose!

Hello Jade.

what's up?

There's something I want you to do before tomorrow evening's 'pick up.'

sure rose, what is it?

First, tomorrow before the pickup, you need to go to the Mayor's house...

Feferi Peixes carried the tray of tea back to the study. Her adoptive father had some important guests over and she needed to make sure they were treated perfectly; apparently a very important deal for the city was being struck. As she was about to open the door back to the study, someone opened the door from the other side. Out walked Jade Harley, a researcher currently working at the military base.

oh, feferi!

Jade, so you're one of the guests! I brought you some tea.

oh, um, i'll have to take that from you here.

Jade grabs onto the edge of the tray.

the conversation is getting very... classified. : /

O)(, okay.

Feferi relinquishes the tray and Jade hurriedly takes it inside. Almost immediately afterwards, Jade returns with the empty tray.

apparently im not classified to hear it all either : /

oh! here's your tray back.

Jade hands the empty tray back to Feferi. As Feferi begins to walk the tray back to the kitchen, Jade follows her.

how have you been? it's been so long since we've seen one another.

T)(e whole mob mind-control t)(ing)(as s)(aken me up, but ot)(erwise I'm just fine.

do you have a boyfriend?

The question startles Feferi so much that she drops the tray. She sputtered out her response while trying to hide her blush.

N-no I don't!

well, i was just asking because, yesterday, when i was getting some predictions from ro... the seer, she mentioned that tonight would be a lucky night for romance.

O)(... well... how have you been?

Jade and Feferi continued to talk and try to catch up. Feferi, however, was only half paying attention, because she was busy making plans for tonight.

"S.E.E.ing Double, Part 2" by Redikalus

It was noon before Sollux was able to track Rose down again. Not only was she eating lunch with the Alpha Dave Strider, they were eating at the Devil's Spice, a Strider Mafia run business. They were eating outside on a small veranda with a handful of tables. Despite yesterday's storm, today had amazing weather. So much so that Sollux kinda wished that he had taken a day off today, but no one else would pursue this case, so he had no choice but to work. Fortunately for Sollux, the restaurant next door was a perfectly legitimate business and also had some outside seating. Sollux took the table nearest to the Devil's Spice and was trying to decide what to order while trying to listen to Rose and Dave's conversation when he heard something that almost made him drop his menu. Sollux glanced over in their direction and his suspicion was confirmed. Their very waiter was a Dave Strider wearing an bad wig and obviously fake mustache. Jegus, it was like they wanted him to connect them to the Strider Mafia or something.

Sollux spent the next half an hour eavesdropping on their conversation only to be disappointed. The two were talking about rather benign things and no matter how Sollux analyzed the conversation, he could find no conceivable code talk or secret messages being passed. Suddenly his radio buzzed on:

"Come in Officer Captor, a report has come in that The Culler is striking again, this time at the Lusii Monument."

The other patrons of the restaurant began to give Sollux dirty looks for allowing their quiet meals to be disturbed. Sollux cursed under his breath; surely Rose and Dave heard that. He didn't have time for this, but... he couldn't let any other cop take this. He hastily picked up his receiver.

ten four on that, iim on my way there.

Sollux called for his check, hurriedly paid and rushed off. As he left Dave and Rose also called for their tip. When their waiter brought the check he asked, would you two care for anything else tonight

No, thank you, we are in a hurry.

yeah

we need to pick something up from my friends

Dave the waiter nodded and with that, the signal was sent. Rose and Dave paid and the three left the table to get ready for tonight's event.

Elsewhere in the city, someone had hacked the police radio system, with some much needed help from a device acquired just for such an occasion. Who knew the system would be so secure. The hacked radio suddenly buzzed on, giving the hacker the same message it gave Sollux. The hacker smile, this time it was a supervillain. Tonight was looking to be a lucky night.

Rose stood at the entrance to S.E.E.R.'s most secure base of operations and main storage center for secured artifacts. Standing with her were her friends and fellow S.E.E.R members John, Jade, and Dave, all dressed up as their respective alter egos.

Flanking them were two members of the Strider Mafia. A delivery truck drove up to the hidden entryway. In the driver and passenger seats sat two more members of the Mafia. As the truck came to a stop, the back doors swung open and out jumped another two Striders. As the Striders pulled out ramps up to the storage section, Rose and the others walked over to get a better look. They found nine crates stack up near the back of the truck, the number they were looking for and the biggest amount of Skaian technology S.E.E.R. had ever delivered: a year worth of work from the Mafia. Rose started barking orders.

John, Jade, and three Striders, start hauling these boxes over to the elevator! Everyone else stay up here on guard duty!

The Strider in the passenger seat hopped out and helped Jade grab one of the crates, John was the only one who could lift a crate by himself. The driver stayed in his seat, prepared to make a getaway if necessary. The five of them dragged the first three crates over to the lift, John pressed a button, and the lift began to lower them into the hideaway. Alpha Dave looked at Rose.

tell me again why we cant use jades space powers to just warp them in

Because it's shielded against that so someone with similar powers can't just teleport in and rob us blind!

right

Rose was wearing a look of frustration on her face. Dave couldn't understand why; the delivery was going smoothly. They stood there in silence for a few moments before Dave spoke up again.

youre acting like something is going wrong

which isnt happenin

I can't shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong tonight.

we shook that red and blue eyed asshole

I know, that's not it. Maybe we will get attacked.

John and the others came back up the lift at the moment. Rose turned to them.

Good work so far. Keep going with the next three.

The next three boxes were dragged back to the elevator and they began their descent again. Rose began passing back and forth when Dave responded to her last comment.

no one is going to attack

and even if they are they will find a fucking hard nut to crack

weve got crowbro egbertman space lass and you here as well as ten members of the mafia protecting the past present and future

not to mention all the censors and defenses you rigged the area with

this is probably the safest place in the city right now

Rose stopped and shook her head.

I know, but I still can't shake this feeling.

She sounded as if she wanted to believe him that they were safe. The five came back up and Dave did the talking this time.

one more group and were home free

keep em going

The Striders and Jade grabbed the first two boxes and Egbert grabbed the last one and they carried them back to the elevator. Once again John pressed the button that began their descent. Rose and Alpha Dave stood in silence letting the seconds tick by. Rose pulled out her wand and examined it, it had been a long time since she had used it. After an agonizing wait for Rose, the five crate carriers came back up the elevator.

okay rose, everything's set down there.

delivery complete!

Dave signaled for the Mafia to pack it up. The four Striders that came in the van shut the rear doors and took their previous positions as the truck drove off. Dave turned back to Rose.

see

no problems

Rose still had that stressed look on her face.

Perhaps my feeling will be satisfied once I see the crates down there.

The four of them went back to the elevator and rode it down. It went down a good hundred feet before stopping. It opened up to a hallway lined with doors. They walked to the end of the hallway and opened the double doors found there. Rose walked through to their storage room and found the nine crates place exactly where she wanted them. She let out a sigh of relief.

Alright, let's break them open. I can sort them later.

The four of them grabbed crowbars that lay on a table near the entrance and began cracking open the crates. Within was stored marvoulous devices of nearly limitless forms and uses. Rings, communicators, weapons, anything you could imagine. And now these potent devices were safe from the city's shadowy underworld. Each of the group broke open tow of the crates leaving one crate unopened. Rose walked over and wrenched it open herself. When she looked inside she dropped her crowbar and a look of horror spread across her face. Dave caught on to something being wrong first and walked over.

rose

whats wrong with that cra-

As he came closer, Dave saw what was wrong. The crate contained not a single artifact, but a pile of simple, useless rocks. Someone had swapped the contents.

oh-

FUCK!!!

"S.E.E.ing Double, Part 3" by Redikalus

Sollux finally caught up with Feferi when the sun was setting. She was sitting on top of the monument, on what looked to be a two headed beast of some sort, in her usual Culler costume, waiting for him. Sollux walked up to the group of statues and was about to say something before Feferi cut him off.

O)(Officer Captor! It seems we meet again!

She giggled as she stood up.

look, feferii

Feferi corrected him, The CULL-ER!

Sollux sighed.

look, the culler, ii am, er, wa2 doing 2omething important and not iin the mood.

Feferi hopped over to the next nearest statue head and pouted.

Are you saying you don't want to see me?

no, no, no, that'2 not iit.

it'2 just that ii wa2 working on an iimportant iinve2tiigatiion.

T)(en w)(y didn't any one take over for you like t)(ey usually do?

Sollux hesitated, now the conversation was about to turn awkward.

becau2e... iim the only one who thiink2 iit2 iimportant to iinve2tiigate

If no one else t)(inks its important, then it must not be important.

Feferi slid down the monument and landed right next to him.

W)(at's really going on sollux?

ju2t that iim iinve2tiigatiing 2omethiing that could bring down one of the gang2 and no one beliieve2 me and iit2 makiing me really fuckiing stressed

Feferi sighed, crossed her arms and turned her back to him.

The Seer was wrong about tonig)(t being a lucky nig)(t...

the 2eer?

ro2e!?

2he2 the one iim iinve2tiigatiing!

Sollux slapped his forehead with realization.

2he2 connected to the 2trider mafia and 2he2 manipulatiiing you to get me off her back!

2he2-

Feferi had whipped around and covered Sollux's mouth with her hand.

Does Terezi t)(ink Rose is connect?

Sollux paused and then reluctantly shook his head. Feferi released his mouth and placed her hands on the sides of his head, bringing their faces closer together and whispered.

T)(en it sounds like someone is being paranoid.

Sollux blushed.

maybe youre riight.

Feferi began smiling again. But Sollux felt neither happiness nor relief. Years of working with Terezi on the most dangerous cases Alternia had given him a knack for knowing when something bad was about to happen, and right now, that feeling was going off like a fire alarm right next to his ear. Sollux acted quickly and created a small psionic burst in between Feferi and himself that blasted them back a couple feet each. He was not a moment too soon. As Feferi began to cry out with anger and dejection when a figure slammed into the ground right where Feferi was standing

moments before. Feferi was right; tonight was not a lucky night. Sollux sprang up, ready for action and thought he recognized his attacker.
Crowbro?

Don Strider was standing, with a good number of the Mafia behind him, before Rose Lalonde and the Alpha Dave in his Crowbro costume. It had been a long time since he had received direct communication with Rose. Don was one of the original paradox clones, and the only one that hadn't met his doomed fate yet. This longevity had earned him the title of acting leader of the Strider Mafia, sending weekly reports to and only infrequently receiving orders from Alpha Dave and even more rarely from Rose. In fact, this was the first time she had spoken directly to him since they founded the organization. Don had never seen Rose mad before, but now she was downright furious with him.

Sorry? SORRY!? We lose a month's work of gathering powerful artifacts and protecting them from the other gangs and all you have to say is 'Sorry'?

look

we didnt know someone had swapped the contents
and since all crates were on 24 hour watches and no problems were reported
we didnt think to check

What I'm hearing from you only tells me that our thief came from inside the Mafia, or that our thief is so good that they outclassed a group of 'time traveling ninjas' to the point that you were not even aware something was wrong!

Something tells me that the latter is very unlikely!

Don began to sweat, Rose was right; the most likely scenario was that there was a traitor in the Strider Mafia. That was bad. Very, very bad. Like 'disband' the entire Mafia and start over bad.

give me the crate info and we can start investigating from there

Rose continued to glare at him as she recounted the details of the crate and what was supposed to be in it. As she finished, Don was sweating profusely and was wearing an expression face that showed surprise, realization and guilt. Rose caught on immediately.

Is there something that you have been forgetting to tell me Mr. Strider?

uh

that crate

was the crate that i was guarding personally

...

i think i know who stole it

There was a long, awkward pause.

Well?

it was...

oh you wont like this...

Oh?

we were attacked a couple nights ago

And you didn't think to check the cargo you were protecting afterwards!?

well

the attacker didnt seem to be targeting the goods

just me

and it happened so fast that i didnt think she had a chance to grab the goods
The Alpha Dave spoke up.
so thats what happened to the missing striders
So who was it? Rose asked impatiently.
it was

...

Don continued to hesitate and then mumbled the last part.
our daughter.

Silence spread throughout the room as Rose and Alpha Dave just stared at him. The silence lasted for a full minute before Rose broke it.

What?

Don began to recall the whole ordeal of meeting Magpie, that she was from the future, that she attacked and killed a handful of men, that she was proficient with time trickery, that she didn't give him ample opportunity to explain the Mafia, and that he had no idea who her mother was. Rose and Alpha Dave just stood there, silent until Don finished his story. Alpha Dave responded first.

and you didnt tell me before this
why

Don scratched the back of his neck.

like I said

we didnt realize she was stealing anything
and the weekly report is tomorrow
so i figured i would bring it up then

Rose walked up to Don, stared at him inscrutably, and then plucked a hair off of his.

ow

what the fuck

I'm going to send this to John.

Hopefully his Ecto-tracker can track her with her father's DNA and not her mother's.

Alpha Dave stepped up.

yeah

then we can track her down and get our stuff back

No.

what

No, I'm going to handle this myself.

"S.E.E.ing Double, Part 4" by Redikalus

Feferi hid to the side of the Lusii monument, which had remained mercifully unscathed, and watched as Sollux unleashed another eyeblast at their now flying attacker. The blast was barely dodged.

What are you doing!? I was trying to help you.

Okay, that voice was definitely female. Crowbro definitely wasn't female. Sollux responded as he charged up another eye blast.

help me? you were attacking u2!

No, not you, I was attacking the supervillain!

Wait... 'attacking **us**'?

Sollux released the charged blast. His adversary was ready for it apparently as she dodged this one quite deftly.

iinca2e you havent noticed, iim a cop

ii wa2 handliing it

Handling it? She had gotten a hold of you!

I was trying to save you!

And what did you mean by 'us'?

Sollux released the charge he was building as the question hit him. He heard Feferi giggling from her hiding spot.

okay, you clearly have no iidea what2 goiing on do you

What are you talking about!?

look m2 crowbro wannabe, thiis sup-

Eck! No! I'm nothing like that criminal!

Sollux just stared at her. What kind of iidiiot was she?

My name is-

Magpie!

Everyone looked towards the source of this new voice. A woman wearing a purple and black dress was marching towards them. Sollux and Magpie reacted simultaneously.

Rose!

ro2e!

Or maybe I should call you... Maggie.

Magpie gasped.

How do you know my name?

I am the Seer: I make it my job to know things.

Rose reached her hands into the folds of her dress.

There is something else I know. Do you know what that is Maggie?

Rose pulled an ebony wand out of the hidden pocket in her dress. Magpie was still shaking off the shock and didn't answer.

No? Then I will tell you.

Rose raised her wand and pointed it at Magpie

You stole a group of very valuable things from me and I want them back.

Magpie was struck by shock again but was able to give a response.

What!? No! I would never- Not from you- I only-

And then a look of realization struck Magpie's face. She looked down and glared at Rose.

The only thing I've stolen was a crate of technology from the Strider Mafia! You're

working for those criminals!?

This brought Sollux back to his senses.

wait, 2he2 2ayiing you work for 2triider?

Magpie shot down and landed a several feet in front of Rose. She pointed her LazSword at Rose and demanded,

Tell me!

Rose kept her arm pointed towards where Magpie previously was and responds calmly.

No, you have a very small grasp on the situation, little girl, put your sword down before someone gets hurt.

Magpie, insulted, strikes a fighting stance.

Or what?

Rose pauses and the answers,

This.

Rose eyes glow black for a heartbeat of a moment and then, before Magpie could register what was happening, swung her wand down. The impact of the spell slammed into Magpie, causing her to drop her sword and launching her into the air towards the monument. As she flew, Rose lifted her wand back up to eye level, levitating the LazSword a safe distance away from everybody and then swung it horizontally. As Magpie crashed into the monument, a part of the glove on each hand ripped off and flew through and arc matching Rose's swing right into her hand.

My timetables!

Rose looked down at them. They weren't even the size of her hand.

Fascinating, they are smaller than I expected.

Rose walked over to the LazSword, picked it up, turned it off and tucked it and the timetables into the spot where she stored her wand. Magpie began to pick herself up off of the monument.

Hey! Give those back!

No. You will get these back when I believe you are going to use them responsibly.

What?

Magpie finished getting up and walked towards Rose. Rose raised her wand back up and pointed it at Magpie again. Magpie stopped in her tracks and she and Sollux tensed up, waiting for a fight. Rose slowly lowered her wand and then folded her arms. Sollux relaxed a little and Feferi, sensing that the fighting was over moved away from the monument to get a better view.

Like I said, you have a very poor grasp of the situation. Then again, there's a lot about you that I don't know.

could 2omeone explaiin what2 goiing on wiith thii2 broad?

Rose ignored him for the time being.

You attacked The Culler here because she was a super villain I suspect?

Yes, isn't she?

Technically, yes, but she is harmless.

If you had chosen to talk to her you would find her to be quite sympathetic.

Magpie looked back to Feferi as she began to approach Sollux and then back to Rose. She felt guilty; this was the second time she was learning this lesson.

I do not know what it is like from when you came, and yes I know you are from a future of sorts.

Perhaps the city then will be black and white, simple conflict, no ambiguity.

But here?

Rose held up the index and middle fingers on her empty hand.

Two?

Yes, two.

That is how many truly 'white' people I believe there are in this city.

Rose added her ring finger to the count.

This is the number of how many truly 'black' people I believe there are in this city.

Egbertman and Mayor WV for white and Mr. Pupa, Spades Slick, and Kingpin for black.

Everyone else is grey. Everyone else tries their best, or their worst, but fail to compare to those five, even you as I see it.

Those of us who fight for good, even as grey as we are, do our best to save as many lives as we can. We do the best we can, but sometimes we have to make sacrifices.

Sometimes we do unsavory actions like lying, cheating and stealing. Like taking bribes, helping criminals, or killing unsavory people. But despite all our problems we are still trying to do the right thing.

Take the police for example they are filled to the brim with corruption and they know it.

If they know they are corrupted, then why don't they do something about it?

Sollux?

Sollux clears his throat before answering.

that ii2 becau2e iif we threw out every corrupt cop we had, we would have only a handful of people and would be unable to protect the ciity.

Magpie lowered her head, thinking about what she was hearing.

And The Culler?

She is only a supervillain because it is the only way to spend time with Mr. Captor here.

You see, she is in love with him, but he is a low-class cop while she has purple blood... literally.

At this point Feferi was standing next to Sollux and hugged him for dramatic effect.

So the only way she can see him without people being suspicious about it is to don the costume and play this game of cat and mouse.

You should be careful to judge someone by their intent, not their actions.

There was a brief silence as Rose let her words sink in. Sollux was the first to break the silence.

how much of that wa2 aiimed at her and how much wa2 aiimed at me?

Good question, and here is another good one.

Magpie, where are the items you stole?

Magpie looked up at Rose and stared at her before answering.

Are the Strider Mafia on the 'good side'?

You should ask them, not me, and for the record, the things you took, no matter who you took them from, truly do belong to me.

Magpie hung her head and sighed.

Fine. I'll get them back to you.

Sollux interjected, it was about time he got to the bottom of this.

iif theiir your2, then how diid the 2triider mafia get them?

Rose looked at Sollux and Feferi and then reached into her pockets again.

I am sorry about your night being ruined. It ultimately is my fault that she's here.

that doe2nt an2wer my que2tion rose.

I know.

Rose pulled a ticket from her pocket and offered it to Sollux.

This is a coupon for a free dinner at my mother's restaurant. It is a nice place with surprisingly good food. A perfect place for a romantic dinner, something I suspect your relationship has been lacking.

Sollux and Feferi looked at each other and then began to object before Rose cut them off.

And with the clientele that it serves, it is very unlikely either of you would be recognized, even in your normal clothes. But you better hurry, it stops taking orders in an hour or so and it is quite far away.

Feferi perked up.

O(! T)(ank you Rose!

Sollux just stared at the ticket before asking.

thii2 ii2 2o you can get away wiithout answeriing my que2tioon ii2nt iit?

Feferi groaned and rolled her eyes.

You don't beat around the bush do you? But, yes, it is. The question is, are you still going to take it knowing that?

Sollux continued to stare at the ticket and Rose's words raced through his mind. We do the best we can, but sometimes we have to make sacrifices. After a second of thought, he had reached his decision.

feferii...

let2 go have a niice diinner.

As Feferi screamed with delight and hugged him, Sollux smiled and reached out for the ticket in Rose's hand, but she did not relinquish it yet.

Pyrope,

what?

Zahark,

Megido,

WV and AR.

I will tell you this Mr. Captor, in this game that the police, the vigilantes, and the underworld are playing, I have my own hand to play. But I don't want certain players to know that I have that hand, if you catch my drift.

I don't care what you tell them about what happened tonight, that nothing happened, that you found irrefutable proof to connect me to the Strider Mafia, but, please, only tell those five. You and they are the only people in the force and the government that I truly trust.

Sollux nodded his head. riight. And Rose relinquished the ticket.

As the two lovers ran off to make it to the first romantic dinner they have yet had, Rose turns back to Magpie.

May I have my things back now?

Oh, no, you, your father and I have a lot to talk about.

Magpie groaned and followed Rose to a conversation she was really dreading.

"A Very Strider Christmas" by waveridingHonchopal

Don Strider, Don of the Strider Mafia, shot the Alpha Dave Strider a nervous look. Alpha Dave had always been better at hiding his emotions, but on the inside, he was almost as nervous as Don. Between them, Alpha Dave as his high-tech vigilante alter ego Crowbro, and Don, a paradox clone of Dave created by shenanigans involving time travel, leading an entire Mafia consisting of still more Dave Strider paradox clones, they had faced off against some of the greatest menaces to ever threaten Alternia City. Crowbro had taken down countless criminals, usually in such a manner that the Alternia City Police Department was left with nothing really to do but haul off the corpses. The Strider Mafia was one of the six major gangs in the city, but unlike the Midnight Crew, the Felt, the Mindfang Pirates, the Kingpin's Mob, and Pupa's organization, the Strider Mafia had a very different goal; to protect the city from anything that could threaten whatever fragile peace there was. Together, this man, in all his versions, was some the most dangerous men in the entire city. So what could have the original time-traveling ninja and his oldest and most experienced clone this scared?

Don adjusted his tie nervously. Dave smirked, tilting his head in such a way that the overhead light glinted off his shades in a way that only served to make them look even cooler.

nervous?

what happened to that world-famous strider stoicism?

Don jutted his jaw out, attempting to display strength in the face of the original version of himself.

you've never fought her

you don't know what she's capable of

you should be proud that i've toned it down to just nervous

Dave rolled his eyes, a gesture that was lost behind his shades.

look

will you just relax already

rose is with her

rose says she's got it sorted

i trust rose

you should too

Don sighed.

you're right

it's just

you've never met her

you don't know what she's capable of

Dave walked up and put a comforting hand on his clone's shoulder.

calm down

rose knows what she's doing

everything's gonna be fine

As if on cue, the door at the other end of the room opened. A tall, blonde woman walked into the room. She wore a dress that was as black as the Void, which seemed to billow in a wind that didn't make sense, seeing as they were two hundred meters underground. Her lipstick and mascara were a shade that matched the inky black of her dress, contrasting sharply with her pale features. Her violet eyes gave off this

strange aura that gave the impression that she could see far more than a normal person. Her expression was impassive, serene and unshakable, until one corner of her mouth turned upward in something between a smirk and a grin.

Hello again, dearest brother.

The two Daves were about to respond, but they were distracted by the figure that slunk in behind Rose. Don instinctively got into a combat-ready stance, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. He had let his guard down the last time he had encountered this figure, and he had paid dearly. Dave maintained the same level of near-readiness as he usually did; growing up with Bro had taught him to never fully let his guard down.

The person that followed Rose Lalonde into the room was a young woman in her late teens. She was wearing a costume that looked remarkably similar to the Alpha Dave's Crowbro costume, except that it had been clearly designed for a more feminine figure. The mirrored visor of her helmet had been raised, revealing a face that would actually have been really pretty, if it weren't for the disgruntled expression on her face. She glanced up warily at Dave and Don through hazel brown eyes, but they weren't filled with the malice that Don had experienced the last time he had had a run-in with her. Rose took note of how the Daves and the woman reacted to each other, but decided that it was irrelevant.

Now, Maggie, I believe there's something you wanted to say to your father.

Maggie Strider, better known to the general public as the high-tech vigilante "The Maggie", fidgeted uncomfortably.

Um, Daddy, I just wanted to say... I'm sorry for attacking you and stealing those artifacts.

Don blinked in surprise, a gesture that was hidden from the others by his ever-present shades. He and Dave exchanged a glance. Rose looked at Maggie expectantly.

Was that all you wanted to ask?

Maggie fidgeted some more. Dave and Don would never admit it, but their curiosity was piqued now. Maggie hesitated, and then suddenly blurted out:

Are you the good guys?

Dave and Don looked at each other again; they were really baffled now; the original raised an eyebrow at his clone. When they responded, they seemed to talk over each other.

yes

well, at least, i like to think so

yeah, i think we are

i mean, we don't always do good things

but in the end

but in the end

yeah i think we're good guys

yeah, what he said

Maggie sighed and looked up at them.

Well, I guess that's all I can really ask for, then. Truce?

She held out a hand. Don looked at it warily and hesitated, and as such Alpha Dave beat him to it.

truce

They shook on it, and, unbidden, the corner of Rose's mouth curled upward in a smile. She was startled when Maggie then turned on her suddenly.

All right, Aunt Rose, I think it's pretty obvious that there's more going on here than

you've told me yet.

Rose raised her eyebrow.

And what makes you say that?

Well, for one thing, there's the elaborate underground base you've got here.

Dave looked at Rose in surprise.

you didn't blindfold her before you brought her here
why not

Rose ignored him; she was good at doing that with questions she didn't want to answer, or was planning to answer in her own way, on her own time.

Maggie crossed her arms.

So tell me what's really going on.

Now all three were looking at Rose expectantly. Rose returned their looks, her expression impassive, before smiling serenely.

Come, Maggie, I think we have a lot to talk about.

Officer Sollux Captor of the Alternia City Police Department and Feferi Peixes, adopted daughter and secretary to the Mayor, walked up to On The Clockwork Golden, a restaurant owned by Rose Lalonde's mother Lillian. Sollux glanced at Feferi, then at the ticket in his hand.

This is the place.

Feferi looked back at him, nervous but excited. They had been a thing for months now, but that's all it could really be described as, a thing. Their relationship was hardly a typical one. Their difficulties arose from a system that had become effectively defunct decades ago, when the troll caste system had been in place. Although the Hemospectrum had gone the way of the breeding pits at the end of the last war between trolls and humans, a relatively static class system was something that humans had no objection to, and so the trolls' new class system arranged itself more or less along the lines of the old one, with a few strange exceptions, such as the vastly wealthy House of Nitram, who had been a surprising addition to the upper echelons of troll society, and the fallen Serket clan, of whom almost nothing was heard after they staked their fortunes in the war.

Anyway, I digress. The relevant fact of the matter, such as it was, was that the Captor family was a relatively low-class family, and had been even back when the Hemospectrum was enforced by the Troll Empire. The House of Peixes, by contrast, was among the highest houses of the aristocracy; it was even rumored that it had been the noble house that the last Condesce had hailed from, although the records were poorly maintained, particularly after the Records Hive was destroyed by the humans during the war. Even after Feferi's parents died, she was adopted by the Mayor himself, and it simply wouldn't do for someone that high-class to be found consorting with someone as low as Sollux Captor.

Feferi had come up with an interesting solution to the problem. Every once in a while, she would moonlight as a super villain called the Cuttlefish Culler and do some vaguely super villainous things. Sollux would always make sure he was assigned to the case when the Culler struck. He would track her down, and they would hang out for an hour or two while Sollux's partner Terezi would stand watch and make sure no one walked in on them.

Their most recent "date" had gone rather awry, however. Rose had tricked Feferi into

"attacking" the Lusii Monument, distracting Sollux from a case, and the situation had only gotten worse when they were jumped by the Magpie, who was operating under the belief that the Culler was actually dangerous, and then Rose showed up to handle the Magpie and save Sollux and Feferi. Rose had given Sollux and Feferi this ticket to a free dinner at On The Clockwork Golden, to apologize for the major inconvenience that that evening had been for them all.

So now Sollux and Feferi found themselves at On The Clockwork Golden. Rose had assured them that the restaurant's clientele was such that they wouldn't be recognized or look out of place even in their uniforms. Despite this fact, Feferi had stopped at home to change anyway. Now she was wearing a dress that would serve equally well in a formal as it would in a casual setting. Sollux had not had a chance to get all the way out to his apartment in the Settlements to change into civilian clothes; Feferi's apartment and On The Clockwork Golden were fairly close to each other in City Central.

Sollux and Feferi entered the restaurant and checked in their coats at the coat check. The maitre d approached them. Sollux facepalmed when he realized who it was--yet another Dave Strider paradox clone, although this one had actually gone to the trouble of growing an ironically terrible, bushy blond moustache. He also spoke with a clearly faked French accent.

allo allo, do you have a reservation

Well, we have this ticket here...

Sollux produced the ticket. The Dave took the ticket, examined it, sniffed it, and finally licked it. He immediately regretted that last, smacking his lips in disgust, before sniffing it one last time.

hm, ah'm gonna need to take thees to the boss

but first ah will show you to your seat

The Dave showed them to a little table with three chairs. Sollux instinctively took in his surroundings. Sure enough, there was a greatly varied and very eccentric-looking crowd in this restaurant. By Sollux's reckoning, Rose's estimation that nobody would give them a second glance even in if they were in full costume was pretty accurate. Sollux and Feferi took their seats and began looking over the menu.

ah weel be back shortly to take your ordairs

Dave walked away. Sollux and Feferi turned to their menus.

What do you think you'll have?

I'm not sure yet. The whalesteak looks good. What about you?

As they discussed their meals, a string of Christmas lights suddenly fell onto their table. The man who had been hanging them dashed over to apologize.

i'm really sorry about that... Sollux!

Sollux looked up.

John? John Egbert? What are you doing here?

well, i was just helping my mom with the christmas decorations.

but what about you?

i thought you were out being distracted by...

John's eyes widened as he abruptly clamped a hand over his mouth, stopping himself from saying any more. Sollux raised an eyebrow.

What was that?

nothing, nothing... so, how are you?

I'm on a date.

John seemed to see Feferi for the first time and jumped.

oh, hello there!

Then he squinted.

don't i know you from somewhere?

Feferi blushed and sort of willed herself to become even blurrier to the bespectacled boy. This failed very hard.

you look almost like feferi peixes, the mayor's secretary.

but, no, she wears purple goggles, not black.

Sollux glanced at Feferi. Although his corrective 3D glasses made it hard to make out specific colors, he could see that Feferi was still wearing the black goggles that were a part of her CuttlefishCuller costume. While Sollux liked to give her a hard time about the fact that her idea of a clever disguise was basically to change out her goggles, he couldn't deny its inexplicable effectiveness.

Nice to meet you, John, I'm, uh, Irefef.

Sollux winced inwardly at the hastily adopted alias. Fortunately, John seemed to be buying it.

well, it's nice to meet you, too!

i should really be getting back to work on these decorations.

have a nice evening!

You too!

Bye, John.

John picked the Christmas lights up from the table and left.

That was a close one.

No kidding. Isn't that that kid who hangs around the police station a lot?[/COLOR]

Yep. John Egbert. He's a nice kid. Although you probably shouldn't call him that; seeing as he's older than you.

The Dave that had been their waiter returned, and they placed their orders.

oh, by ze way, ze boss wanted to talk to you

Really?[/COLOR]

I wonder why...

you can ask her zat yourself

hey, lillian

you're up

The waiter walked off as an elegant-looking woman with a martini glass approached their table. Her resemblance to Rose was apparent in the ease with which she seemed to glide across the room. Her eyes were a lighter shade of purple than Rose's, almost pink, and her hair, though somewhat curlier, was the same shade of very light blonde.

hello, sollux

Have we met?

no, but i have heard of you

you're one of the top cops in the city

you're actually a bit of a celebrity

Really?

Sollux was surprised. Well, yeah, he and Terezi did make up one of the more successful cop pairings in the city, and were fairly well known among the enforcers of law and order in the city, but he hadn't realized that that fame extended beyond the APD. Then again, he supposed that if there was more to Rose than met the eye, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to assume that the same extended to her mother.

What was it you wanted to see us about?

this.

Lillian held up the ticket. Sollux was immediately on guard.

What about that?

these tickets are very rare, as they treat you to a full free dinner here.

not many people can just hand them out.

Your point?

look, I know you got this from Rose,

and I was hoping you could do a favor for me.

And what would that be?

if you see her again,

could you please ask her to call?

we've never exactly been on the best of terms,

but I worry about her.

it's a mom thing, I guess.

Sollux and Feferi exchanged a glance.

That sounds fair enough.

Yeah, I see where you're coming from.

We'll tell her if we see her.

Lillian looked grateful.

thank you.

it really means a lot to me.

she's my only daughter, after all.

At that moment, the daughter in question was at the S.E.E.R. base deep beneath the city, trying to defuse the tensions between three other members of the family.

Rose was leading the group, giving Maggie the grand tour of the base, while Dave and Don trailed behind.

And here we have our kitchen, where we keep some food in case we're here working late.

Does that happen often?

Usually only to me.

Another Dave entered the room from the other end, spotted Maggie, and instinctively dove for cover. Rose rolled her eyes.

it's all right, dave, you can come out

The sound of Don's voice brought the cautious paradox Dave out from cover.

sir, i came to remind you that it's christmas

time for the christmas patrols

Don's eyebrows rose.

right

i forgot about those

i'll be right there

Don and the paradox Dave left. Maggie turned to Rose and Dave, confused.

Christmas patrols?

Christmas is an intense time for everyone in the city. People go out shopping for valuable gifts, lots of money changes hands, Santa visits town... basically, it's the sort of thing that has a million ways to go horribly wrong, and our city has certain parties that would like to see it do so.

so what we do is patrol the city and try to stop anything from going wrong

it's tough, yeah
but we do what we can

Maggie raised an eyebrow. From what she had observed of Dave Strider since she had come back in time, this sort of altruism wasn't what she expected.

Can I help? I could, like, do aerial patrols or something!

Rose and Dave looked at each other in surprise.

Certainly, I suppose.

we could always use the help

Back at the restaurant, Sollux's radio buzzed.

I knew I should've turned that off.

Begrudgingly, he answered it.

Captor here.

Sollux, we got a call that someone is trying to steal Christmas.

Steal Christmas? That's seriously what they said?

Hey, I didn't place that call; don't shoot the messenger.

I mean, I can M8KE you not shoot the messenger if I want to.

I know you can Vriska.

Do you happen to know where this alleged stealer of Christmas is?

Not yet, I'm still tracing the call.

Until I find them, we're on city-wide alert.

What? Who said you could do that?

I did. Now get out there and start looking for this yahoo!

Sollux sighed and rolled his eyes.

I'm sorry, Feferi, but I have to go to work now.

I understand, Sollux.

I could come and help you, if you like.

No, I think you should get home.

What would we do if your father started worrying?

Feferi winced. Sollux was right. The Mayor had enough to worry about as it was, with all the regular chaos of the Christmas season. And he would of course have heard about the city-wide alert from AR.

I'll see you around, then, I guess.

Sollux hugged her.

Hey, we'll see each other again before too long.

Just make sure I'm not busy first before you attack another major landmark.

Feferi grinned.

Will do.

She kissed him.

A short distance away, John Egbert planned his next course of action, having overheard Sollux's radio conversation.

someone's trying to steal christmas?

He struck a heroic pose.

TO THE BATHROOM!

Lillian chuckled as her stepson charged past her.

most obvious superhero ever

The Magpie took to the night sky, having finally received the timetables and laser sword that her aunt had confiscated at the end of the previous episode. Dave, now clad in his Crowbro costume, watched her enviously.

she's actually flying

damn

wish i could do that

Rose looked at her brother in amusement. Willing a little bit of power into the Quills of Echidna, she levitated herself about a foot off the ground and waited for Dave to notice.

shut up

High above them, the Magpie was already out of earshot. As she soared high above the city, she turned her gaze to its skyline, taking in the sight. Alternia City at night was truly beautiful, which was why she enjoyed patrolling during the nighttime hours so much. Ironically (of course) she had learned that her father actually enjoyed patrolling at night himself, for the same reasons. As she looked across the city, she noticed something else fly up from the general vicinity of City Central. Curious, she decided to fly over and take a look.

Riding a strong wind up from the top of the clock tower that gave On The Clockwork Golden its name, Egbertman finally got to an altitude from which he could survey the city. The only unusual thing of note was the large brown shape flying toward him from the general vicinity of Dockside. Curious, Egbertman flew over to take a look.

The Magpie was surprised by the sudden headwind she was facing and fought to regain control. When she recovered, she found herself face to face with the man who had rode the gust in question there.

sorry about that.

are you all right?

Yeah, yeah, I should be fine.

So, just venturing a guess here, but you're Egbertman, right?

yep, that's me!

what about you?

it's not every day that i meet someone who can fly, after all.

I'm the Magpie.

Egbertman was immediately on guard. He didn't know much about the Magpie, only what he had heard from Don, but he knew that she was armed and dangerous. He quickly did some calculations in his head; he didn't want to see what her laser sword could do to the Warhammer of Zillyhoo, so he decided that, given the battlefield, he was probably better off simply using the Windy Thing in case a fight broke out. The Magpie realized that Egbertman was probably thinking what he was, in fact, thinking, and raised her hands.

Hey, hey, calm down. I'm on your side.

Aunt Rose asked me to help with the Christmas patrols.

Egbertman relaxed a little, but not completely. Just then, his communicator went off. Not taking his gaze completely off the Magpie, he answered it.

Yes, she's on our side, and yes, she's helping with the Christmas patrols.

Egbertman and the Magpie just stared at the communicator.

how does she do that?

The Magpie could only shrug.

Far below them, Sollux Captor was patrolling the streets of City Central, working his way out toward one of the bridges to the Glass City district.

This is ridiculous. I'm not getting anywhere on foot.

It was at this point that Sollux remembered that he could, in fact, fly. He groaned and wished he had thought of that twenty-two minutes before. He used his innate psionic powers to lift himself into the air, taking in the city... and as he was looking down and around, he almost crashed into the two figures flying directly above him.

Watch where you're going!

Sorry.

Sollux apologized, and then took a closer look at the two figures in the air. He recognized Egbertman immediately, of course; the man was easily the most popular hero in the city. He also could tell that it was in fact John Egbert beneath that blue... good grief. It seemed that in the spirit of Christmas, Egbertman had substituted his normal blue windsock-shaped hoodie for a blue Santa hat of the same length. He also recognized the Magpie, particularly after the incident earlier that night.

hi, officer captor!

Hey, Egbertman. What are you up to?

we heard that somebody was planning to steal christmas and wanted to stop them.

Wait, we did?

Egbertman sheepishly scratched the back of his head.

okay, maybe i forgot to mention that part.

Sollux rolled his eyes, a motion concealed by his corrective 3D glasses. He had thought that John was standing awfully close to his table when that call had come in...

Well, I just so happen to be searching for the same person.

We should split up and report back once any of us find anything.

sounds good to me.

Over in the Settlements, Lieutenant Terezi Pyrope was walking down the street, peering between buildings that were crammed very close to each other in the lower-class residential area.

Come out, come out, wherever you are.

The city-wide alert had in fact interrupted her during a manhunt for the infamous street thug Karkat Vantas. Terezi had volunteered for the search because she had been very good friends with Karkat when they were children, and thus knew a little bit about how his mind worked. She also didn't mind working on Christmas, because she had been brought up Troll Jewgish, and Hanukkah was weeks ago.

Terezi sniffed the air for any sign of life in the shadows. Her unique form of vision was more or less unhampered by the nighttime. The moonlight was enough for her to be able to smell her way around. Still, she had her cane out, just in case. Not only was it useful for double-checking her progress, it also served as a serviceable melee weapon, should such a situation arise.

Terezi then noticed a sudden splash of lemon in the otherwise unremarkable tea-smell of the night. She didn't alter her pace; didn't want to alert her quarry that she had noticed its presence. She took a few more sniffs to clarify the picture; salamander consorts, three of them, trying to get into a building unnoticed. She turned and walked

toward them, hoping they wouldn't notice. Fortunately, Terezi noted, they weren't wearing the trademark cloaks of the Cult of the Secret Wizards. Normal robbers were problem enough as it was.

She then noticed that they were struggling to keep hold of some sort of sack and drag it through the window. So they had already gotten the goods. She chose that moment to announce her presents.

Stealing is against the law, you know.

The salamanders jumped as they found themselves face-to-face with the most feared law enforcer in Alternia City. They backed away nervously. Then, something strange seemed to happen. Two of them jumped her without warning, while the third took off with the bag. Terezi was caught flat-footed, and it took her a minute to beat off her attackers. By that point, the salamander with the bag was long gone. Terezi swore under her breath and dashed in the direction it had gone.

Karkat Vantas, leader of the infamous, somewhat successful Karkat Gang, crouched down to where he could be at eye level with the various consorts bringing him the things that they had looted from the houses in the area. With any luck, there would be something that their employer would find particularly valuable.

Nepeta Leijon, cat burglar extraordinaire, arrived with a sack of goodies of her own. She was hitting all the particularly difficult houses, those few where the owners actually had enough money to invest in a security system, and thus would require more skill than a mere consort could pull off.

What've you got for me, Nepeta?

Karkat stood up, but as he was still rather short, he found himself at eye level with the teenage girl's neck. In another life, one that Karkat barely dared dream about, one where they didn't have to fight and steal to survive, she would be at the age where she would be just starting college. But Nepeta had never had those advantages. Orphaned at four, she had never had the opportunity to have an education besides what basic skills Karkat, who had at least a fifth grade education, had managed to impart to her. The streets had been her school, the back alleys the playgrounds of her youth.

Nepeta opened her sack to reveal a large number of gifts.

:33< I got a big haul at that last place, Karkitty

:33< It might even be enough to satisfy Mr. Pupurr

Excellent!

Karkat was genuinely excited. They might even come out of this night with enough to make even the Nefarious and Notorious Mr. Pupa happy!

At that moment, Gamzee Makara joined them. As usual, he reeked of spoor slime and had a vacant expression in his eyes. More unusually, he was decked all out in a reindeer costume.

Gamzee, what the hell are you wearing?

It's a kriffling costume, my bulgelicking bro!

Okay, but why are you wearing it?

It's kriffling Christmas, man! Miracles are happening all over the place. Here, I got you a Santa hat.

Karkat sighed and shook his head. It was obvious he was never going to get an answer that he would like out of his perpetually stoned friend. Instead, he decided to pursue another line of questioning as he begrudgingly donned the hat.

What's that you've got there?

What, this?

Yes, that.

Oh, I got this from a little bro who thought I was one of Santa's reindeer. I told him that there was a mix-up with the presents and that he got some other little kid's and his were still on the way, and I had to deliver the presents to where they actually were supposed to go.

Karkat and Nepeta just stared. That almost sounded... planned-out. Gamzee usually gave the impression that he was more or less incapable of higher thought, much less intricate planning like that.

Their dumbfounded train of thought was interrupted by the sound of a salamander tearing into the alleyway like the police were on its tail. Which, to be fair, they were. He handed over his share of the haul as he babbled out what had happened. Karkat's eyes widened.

Go hide, wherever you can. Try masking your smell; hide in a dumpster or something. Gamzee, Nepeta, come on, we need to get out of here NOW!

:33< beep beep meow!

Where Nepeta had been standing a moment before, there was now suddenly a very cat-themed getaway car. Karkat jumped in the car, but the Bag of Holding artifact Mr. Pupa had loaned him for this job didn't fit, requiring him to dangle it out of the window. Gamzee jumped on the roof.

They drove off just as Terezi dashed into the alley.

Dammit! Well, at least I know now who's responsible. Funny though, Karkat's never seemed the type...

When our three airborne heroes had split up, Sollux had headed southeast toward the Settlements. As he flew over the tight streets that practically defined his home district, he spotted, from above, what looked like a reindeer atop a car that looked like it had been attacked by cat fetishists. And trailing some distance behind the car, on foot, was a troll cop who looked rather familiar.

Gog dammit.

Sollux swooped down to the officer on foot.

Need any help, Lieutenant Pyrope?

Sollux! Boy am I glad to see you. I need an airlift, quick.

Aren't we supposed to be looking for whoever's trying to steal Christmas?

Yeah, and I found them.

Sollux, it was Karkat.

The problem is, they have Nepeta, while I'm stuck on foot.

Not any more.

Sollux grabbed Terezi around the waist and took to the skies.

John Egbert's cell phone rang. Egbertman answered it, baffled as to who would be calling him at this hour.

hello?

John, it's Sollux.

I found the Grinches who're trying to steal Christmas.

So fly your butt over to the Settlements quick.

wait,

how did you know i was egbertman, though?

Seriously?

It's not that hard to figure out.

You don't even bother putting on a mask or taking off your glasses.

nobody else has noticed before.

Yeah, well, the city is overrun with idiots.

But anyway, I need backup, so hurry!

The call ended. John switched it out for his secure S.E.E.R. communicator as he manipulated the localized air currents to blow himself towards the settlements.

hey everybody,

sollux found the bad guys.

meet up at the settlements so we can take them down.

Nepeta swerved to avoid another energy blast from Sollux. Karkat winced in sympathy.

That was close.

:33< meow

Karkat sighed. One of the side-effects of the artifact that allowed Nepeta to transform into a car was that she could only beep or make cat noises to communicate. Dang it, now she's even got me doing the whole cat pun thing.

Karkat, you should just give yourselves up right now and save us all a headache.

Tempting though it sounded, Karkat knew better than to listen. As much as he wanted to end this whole chase, with its crazy driving and energy blasts and all, he didn't want to think about what Mr. Pupa did with those who failed him.

Turning his mind back to the task at hand, Karkat tried to think of a way to evade their pursuers. They were going at pretty high speeds, which would make turning difficult, but maybe they could use that to their advantage.

Nepeta, next right!

Nepeta swerved into a side street between two high-rise buildings, barely making the turn. Sollux and Terezi weren't as lucky, hitting the side of a building at a significant speed. They fell, dazed, onto a convenient fire escape.

Made it!

Karkat's glee was cut short, however, by the abrupt appearance of the Magpie before him.

Nepeta screeched to a halt to avoid hitting the woman. Karkat could only stare at the woman. She looked uncharacteristically serene, with her visor up, eyes closed, and arms outstretched. When she opened her brown eyes, Karkat could see none of the cold steel that had characterized their first meeting, or the warmer, more playful fire that had characterized all their subsequent encounters. There was nothing there that could be read, except for maybe a hint of a smidgen of a sense of betrayal. When she spoke, it was just one word.

Why?

Karkat seemed to only sort of be in control of his body as he opened the door of the car and stepped out.

Maggie, I...

Karkat, why?

I don't...

Don't give me that! I know you! Or at least I thought I did.

Karkat, why did you want to steal from all these people?

It's Christmas.

I was always told that Christmas was a time of giving.

A time of peace, of goodwill, of charity and being nice to people.

Not stealing from them!

She then looked down at her feet as painful memories returned.

Where I come from, Christmas was one of the few things we had left.

Karkat stood, dumbfounded. Maggie almost never talked about her past, which for everyone else was decades in the future.

He finally regained control of himself and approached her.

Maggie, I'm sorry.

The responding slap sent him reeling.

Dammit, Karkat, why would you do such a thing!

I didn't have a choice!

How do you not have a choice about whether or not to steal Christmas?

What kind of sick, twisted person even considers that an option?

The guy I work for, that's who!

Well, why do you work for him, then?

Karkat hesitated, then sighed in resignation.

It was my mistake.

I signed on to work for him, and didn't realize until too late that I was making a deal with the devil.

Once you start working for him, there's no going back.

I mean, I would try to resist, but if I tried that, my chances of survival are approximately kriffing dirt nothing.

And that would be okay too, you know?

To go out standing up for what you believe in.

But I've got more than just me to think about.

I've got Gamzee and Nepeta to worry about.

And I really don't think that they'd make it without me.

So you can sort of see the situation I'm in, huh.

Now it was Maggie's turn to stand dumbfounded.

Karkat, I'm sorry, I didn't know.

It's all right. There's no way you could have known.

Still, it's good to know you didn't want to do it, at least.

Why the heck would that matter?

Maggie smiled and got a wistful look in her eye.

Someone very wise recently told me that nobody can be perfectly good or evil in their actions, and we should always judge them by their intentions.

There is no black and white, merely shades of grey.

Maggie looked down at Karkat's hand, which she belatedly realized she had taken in her own. Her pale skin contrasted sharply with his grey skin in the moonlight. Shades of grey. She chuckled inwardly as Rose's unintentional double meaning sank in.

Well, now that I've caught you, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take back all those presents you stole.

Maggie could feel Karkat tense.

Karkat, I know why you did it, but that doesn't change the fact that it's wrong.

Karkat looked deep into her eyes. She could still see traces of the adolescent grey iris speckled around their predominant color, which was a bright candy-red.

I won't let him hurt Gamzee and Nepeta.

He won't.

Karkat shook his head.

You don't know him.

Maggie, he's scary.

He knows everything.

He sees you when you're sleeping.

He knows when you're awake.

He knows if you've been bad or good

So be good for... wait, hold on.

No, sorry, that's Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.

But the point still stands.

I'm not going to disobey his orders if I have any choice in the matter.

Then it looks like a good thing you don't have any choice in the matter.

Karkat and the Magpie turned. Terezi and Sollux had caught up with them, as had Crowbro, Egbertman, and Rose. Nepeta and Gamzee had both been handcuffed; Sollux was keeping a very close eye on the latter, as Gamzee was infamous for his miraculous ability to always escape custody.

Karkat, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take you in.

Lieutenant, he didn't mean to do it.

Right, like anyone else is going to believe that story.

But it's true! He only wanted to...

Terezi raised her hands and Maggie trailed off.

I never said I didn't believe you.

In fact, I do.

But think about what a jury of random civilians who don't know Karkat as well as we do is going to think.

Maggie frowned.

You have a point.

Terezi then turned her attention to her old childhood friend.

Karkat, I'm taking you in whether you surrender or not.

Don't make this hard on yourself.

Karkat looked at her. Then at Nepeta. Then at Gamzee. Then at Maggie. Then back at Terezi. He then bowed his head and raised his hands in surrender. Terezi stepped forward and clicked a pair of handcuffs onto his wrists.

Now, come along.

Karkat trailed after Maggie and Terezi as they made their way to the back of the group. Their backs were turned; as a result, Dave was the first one who noticed.

GET DOWN!

In a flash, he had tackled Terezi and Maggie to the ground and out of the path of the blast. When the smoke cleared, Karkat, Gamzee and Nepeta were nowhere to be seen. Sollux was visibly furious.

Not again! This is the fourth time this month that clown has gotten away from me! It's like miracles follow him around or something. But that's stupid.

Terezi walked over and threw an arm around his shoulders.

Relax, Officer Appleberry. We'll have another chance to catch them soon enough.

The Magpie, meanwhile, turned back to her father.

Um, thanks for saving me back there.

Dave shrugged.

hey

what are family for

Maggie looked up into her father's shades. For the first time since coming to the past, she realized that this really was the man who had raised her, who had trained her, who she had grown up admiring. And for the first time since coming to the past, she was home.

Once Sollux was done raging about losing Gamzee AGAIN, he remembered the message he had been asked to deliver.

Oh, by the way, Rose.

Yes, Sollux?

Your mother asked me to tell you something.

Something about Rose's demeanor shifted and became somewhat colder.

What did she want you to tell me?

Just that she worries about you and would like it if you called home some time.

Dave and Maggie walked over.

hey rose

you know what we haven't done yet

What?

we haven't told mom that she has a granddaughter yet

we should go do that

Rose sighed.

It seems that the angels and the horrorterrors are conspiring to make an encounter with my mother imminent.

I might as well get this over with.

Sollux found himself at the doorstep of a house he hadn't visited in far too long. He banged the heavy knocker two times to announce his presence. It wasn't long before the door was answered.

Sollux! It's been so long! Come in! Oh, you must be exhausted! Have they been working you too hard? You're so thin! You should come in and eat something.

In response to the woman's barrage of good-intentioned badgering, Sollux could only smile.

Merry Christmas, Mama.

Karkat, Nepeta, and Gamzee shrunk down as their boss, the Nefarious and Notorious Mr. Pupa, stood before them on his robotic legs. The consorts that had rescued them at the last second had stuffed them in an unmarked white van and taken them straight to stately Nitram Manor. Now, they sat under the gaze of the monocled megalomaniac, who did not look happy.

I don't, uh, appreciate, having to go, out of my way, to bail out my people.

You had better, uh, have something, to show for it.

Karkat and Nepeta shot each other a nervous glance. They had been able to escape, yes, but their loot hadn't been as lucky. Or maybe it was lucky that it had gotten captured? I don't know. Either way, they didn't have it, and sitting before Pupa with nothing to show was not a comfortable position.

Karkat stood. Even though Pupa's mechanical legs weren't all that long, he still seemed to tower over the miniature mutant. Karkat sighed in resignation.

I'm sorry, sir, but... we weren't able to hang onto any of the loot after that run-in with the cops.

We've got nothing.

Pupa's monocle glinted as he stared down at Karkat in cold fury. Karkat shrank as he waited for the inevitable outburst.

Uh, actually, my motherglubbing bro, that's not quite true.

Everyone turned toward Gamzee as he dug something out of his reindeer costume.

I got these shiny-ass thingys here. You want 'em?

Pupa took the two sticks from Gamzee. They were, as Gamzee had mentioned, shiny, but they were also compact, well-balanced, and perfectly symmetrical. He examined them for a moment, before his face lit up visibly. He turned back to the Karkat Gang, an evil grin on his face.

Get this man a pie!

So, that's something important, then?

Yes, yes. Now, take your money and go.

Pupa dismissively tossed a large sack of cash from behind his desk to Karkat. Karkat took it, a look of awe and gratitude on his face.

Thank you, sir.

Karkat dashed out of the room before Pupa could change his mind. Nepeta was right behind him. Gamzee followed them, but at the door, he turned around.

Merry kriffing Christmas, boss-man.

Dave, Rose, Maggie, and John entered through the back door of On The Clockwork Golden. The front would've attracted too much attention, as they were all still in costume.

hey mom

we have a surprise for you

well actually two surprises

ooh, a surprise?

i love surprises!

what's the surprise?

Dave and John exchanged a glance.

well, the first surprise is...

go ahead, dave, tell her.

why me

because she's yours, that's why you.

Dave groaned; John made a very good point. He hated when that happened.

mom

i'd like you to meet my daughter

what

maggie

this is your grandmother

Hi.

how is she your daughter?

how do you even have a daughter?

time travel

oh, right.

well, welcome to the family, maggie

Thanks, Grandma.

now what's my other surprise?

you can come out now!

Lillian's jaw dropped when Rose walked in the room.

rose

oh my god

rose

Hello, Mother.

Lillian's eyes teared up.

rose it's been so long

i've missed you so much

Rose caught her mother in a hug as she looked like she was about to collapse.

I've missed you too, Mom.

John looked at this reunion and couldn't help but grin.

god bless us, every one!

"The Littlest Salamander, Part 1" by Aslandus

You are a small salamander, known to some as Casey. You scurry into SEER's base, carrying a large paper bag of groceries. You blow a small bubble to activate the doorbell at the entrance.

Hello? Oh, hey Casey, let me get the door...

John opens the door, and you rush inside carrying the heavy bag.

Casey: Drop the bag on the counter

You hoist the bag up toward the counter, but you're not tall enough to reach.

Here, I've got it, you can go play with Rose or something while I put this stuff away.

John starts tossing the groceries into the fridge and cabinets. No doubt Jade would come by and rearrange them later.

Casey: Play with Rose or something

You head toward Rose's study. You hear her talking to herself as she presumably gazed into her crystal ball.

Hmmm... Another corpse party? Kanaya really needs to start closing her door...

You walk into the room and she notices you.

There you are Viceroy, I need my Quills of Echidna before I can head out for patrol duty. Fetch them for me, would you?

You run off to the SEER armory and grab the pair of wands off the rack. Can't leave Rose waiting around, after all. You scamper back to her and hand her the wands. She dismisses you.

Viceroy Bubbles von Salamancer: Talk to Dave

You find Crowbro in his quarters, it appears he has just gotten back into civilian clothes after patrolling his route in the city. It appears he got in several scuffles tonight.

Hey Stiller, I hope you're having a better night than I am. Seven muggings, plus a run in with two different gangs. I'll have to get Kanaya to repair my Crowbro suit when she comes over tomorrow. It could be worse, but it's still the first time I've had to get that thing repaired, normally I don't even get hit. On the bright side, I finally got up the nerve to toss out that creepy puppet Bro left behind...

He keeps talking for a little while, but you zone out thinking about blue mushrooms. You really need to find a Consort market so you can get some next time you go out for groceries.

...the really ironic part is that the Strider mafia hasn't been doing anything illegal for over a year now, mostly just running the businesses that were set up as a front for collecting those artifacts (hell if I know what Don Strider is up to). I don't even know what those guys were pissed off about, you know? They just sort of came up out of nowhere and hit me with a bat...

Stiller: Dance like your life depends on it!

You dance the liveliest jig your little salamander legs can handle

Have somewhere to be Stiller? I should probably be headed home now, gotta get at least a few hours of sleep before the shop opens. Good night, Stiller.

He pats you on the head as he heads for the exit. Jade is currently out on patrol (it takes Dave a while to get out of his Crowbro suit). She should be back shortly though. You suppose there is a little time to check the local markets for some of the blue mushrooms you've been craving.

"The Littlest Salamander, Part 2" by Aslandus

You are still Casey, now munching on some delicious mushrooms. You reenter the SEER base and head toward the common area-

Hey little Chickadee, what have you been up to?

Chickadee: Say hello to Maggie

You would, but you can't talk, silly little Salamander, but Maggie is willing to do all the talking. In fact, some would say she prefers it that way.

Well, you got some of those mushrooms that Consorts love, but it doesn't say much about how you day is going... Oh well.

She hops off the couch, her bird hat securely on her head. She picks you up and starts carrying you toward the lobby.

We can go on patrol together, Magpie and Chickadee, defenders of Justice... I'm joking, I doubt you could keep pace.

She drops you onto a chair near the hero platform.

Anyway, I've gotta go get changed, you have no idea how long it takes to put on that suit... If I start now, I just might be able to be ready when Rose gets back.

She dashes into the changing room and locks the door behind her. Magpie and her secrets, nobody gets between them.

Chickadee: Find Jade already

You hop out of the chair and scurry over to Jade's study. She's busy... dancing around with a pumpkin on her head? Maybe... you should just come back later...

Chickadee: Run Away!!!

You fail to run away because Jade has spotted you and pulled you into a hug.

Found you, Neutrino! You can't hide from Space Lass!

She tosses you up into the air, and you flail your little Salamander limbs like never before. Jade catches you and starts tickling you. You blow several laugh bubbles before the alarm on all of her computers go off.

Whoops, looks like I need to get home, before Bec II decides to eat the refrigerator. Have a nice night Neutrino!

She pulls on her coat and teleports out of the room, presumably back to her home. What to do for the rest of the night? Maybe visit Don Strider, you haven't seen him in awhile...

"The Littlest Salamander, Part 3" by Aslandus

You have not stopped being the salamander, and possibly never will. The thought frightens you in a way you have never been frightened before. You walk up to the door of the Five Aces Casino (liberated from the Midnight Crew by the Strider Mafia shortly after Spades was arrested). What will you do?

Salamander: Find Don quickly! You must discover what your new nickname is!

It's probably the same thing that Crowbro calls you, but fine. You scamper into the building and up to the main office. None of the paradox clones stop you, and why would they? Several of them know why you're here already, and most of them are busy dealing for the gamblers or sweeping coins off the floors. You reach the office and walk inside. Don Strider is sitting behind the desk, busy with a phone call which doesn't interest you enough to listen in.

Salamander: Tug on Don's leg to get his attention

You use your tiny little Salamander arms to pull on Don Strider's sleeve. He looks over at you.

Hey Stiller, could you give me a minute? I need to finish this call.

Well, if he won't talk to you, you'll just have to muse about him while he's busy. He claims to be from an alternate timeline where Dave's brother never died, so Crowbro never existed... though he's never told you why he came here to this timeline and seems to have evaded the inevitable tragic death that seems to follow most of Dave's paradox clones. It never made sense to you, but he's like Dave for the most part as far as you can tell. Well, apart from the management skill and lack of stoicness.

Ok, ok, I'll talk to you later. Goodbye.

Don hangs up the phone and turns to you.

Hey Stiller, sorry to keep you waiting, but I had to finish that call. Apparently some of Pupa's peons tried to take Strider's Pizza while I was away, but they were fended off.

Stiller: rejoice at having a brand new name

You dance around with joy at no longer needing to be referred to as Salamander.

Whoa, calm down Stiller, you'll knock something over. Could you go get me a cup of coffee from the office down the hall, I'm probably going to be up late...

Stiller: You cannot work under this Tyranny! Run away!!!

You sprint for the door as fast as your little salamander legs will carry you.

Well... Okay then, I guess I'll see you later Stiller...

You successfully escape the Five Aces casino, which nobody was trying to stop you from leaving. What will you do now?

Stiller: pass out from exhaustion

You're not quite that tired yet, but you should head back to SEER's base and get some shuteye. You start heading back home.

"Duel at Noon" by Aslandus

Karkat entered Nitram's Pupa's office, where he was currently having a fit over something.

What is it?

Ahh... Karkat, just the gentleman I wanted to see...

WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?!?!?

Feeling a bit snippy today Karkat? Excellent, I need you to provide a rather... large distraction to a certain police officer...

Which one?

Your favorite one

I DON'T WANT NEPETA AND GAMZEE HAVING TO FIGHT TEREZI! THEY'LL GET SLAUGHTERED!

They will be busy on a... special mission I have for them... Just make sure you don't get captured, otherwise I might decide to let them hold onto you for awhile...

Right... Why exactly do I need to fight Terezi for this mission of yours to work?

If I thought you should know, I would tell you, now go and send Nepeta in to recieve orders

Karkat left Pupa to his scheming, and mulled over his own thoughts. Fighting Terezi? Karkat might be able to hold out, but she'd win in the end like she always did... And what the hell did he want Gamzee and Nepeta to do that required him to be somewhere else... It felt like he was about to walk into a trap, but he couldn't just decide to walk away... This train of thought was interrupted by a troll girl pouncing on Karkat, knocking him to the ground.

:33 < Karkitty! Is something wrong? Did Pupurr tell us to leave?

I think he wants to talk to you and Gamzee about something, but he didn't tell me what... Don't do anything that seems sketchy, he might only be around for five minutes a week, but I don't trust Pupa as far as I could throw him...

:33 < Ok Karkitty...

Nepeta got off Karkat and walked up the stairs to Pupa's office, only a minute or so left for him to give orders, but Nepeta was back in about 10 seconds, Karkat had just gotten back up when he was tackled again...

:33 < *Mr. Pupurr said to rob a bank, not the usual one* *Nepeta ran back as fast as she could*

Ok Nepeta... I guess that's fine, but I'm not sure why he would try to hide a plan like that from me...

Nepeta got off of Karkat and helped him get up. They went into their rooms to prepare for their objectives, Nepeta putting on her burglar clothes and Karkat getting into the suit he used to wear in the Midnight Crew. It was a little worn, but could still stand up in a fight, unlike most of his civilian clothes. Gamzee sat on the couch in the same polka dotted pants and black shirt he always wore...

Meanwhile, at Terezi's office in the ACPD...

Officer Pyrope grabbed the keys to the patrol car and left her office. Her RIGHTEOUS FERVOR is especially high today, those criminals won't know what hit them! Officer Captor follows her to the car and they get ready to patrol the city for troublemakers...

Terezi talked Sollux into riding on top of the car again, using his red and blue eyes as police lights. He was annoyed, but knew she wouldn't stop pestering him until he did it. As such, he fell off the roof when Terezi slammed on the brakes because of the troll standing in the middle of the road.

The troll has on a black suit jacket with a black shirt underneath, and extremely messy hair. There's something oddly familiar about... Terezi suddenly realizes it's her old friend Karkat, who is working for the crime boss Mr. Pupa and has apparently taken to walking in the middle of the road.

Hello Terezi... and Terezi's partner

Fuck you, Karkat

C4lm down Sollux, 1'v3 got th1s. So wh4t br1ngs 4 th3 b1g b4d K4rk4t to th1s part of town?

Can't I just come by to say hello to an old friend?

You c4n, but you'r3 not. You n3v3r w34r th4t g3tup unl3ss you'r3 4nt1c1p4t1ng troubl3. 4m 1 go1ng to h4v3 to br1ng you 1n to ge3t 4n 4nswer out of you?

Maybe.

W3LL TH3N, H4V3 4T TH33!

Terezi grabbed her cane out of the passenger seat and dove toward Karkat. He drew a sickle from inside his coat and blocked the cane.

**LOOKS L1K3 K4RK4S C4M3 PR3P4R3D FOR TH1S F1GHT
THAT THE BEST THE GREAT OFFICER PYROPE CAN DO?
NOT 3V3N CLOS3**

Terezi jumped back and adjusted her grip on her cane, pulling a sword out attached to the handle. She charged at Karkat wielding both the sword and sheathe. Karkat pulled a second sickle out of his jacket and blocked both swings.

W3LL TH1S 1S GO1NG TO B3 1NT3R3ST1NG 1SN'T 1T?

They continue bashing and slashing at each other for several more minutes, the sounds of their weapons impacting echoed through the almost deserted streets.

In the meantime, at the Baron Memorial Bank

Nepeta and Gamzee scope out the lobby. Pretty lax security compared to Alternia National bank, why hadn't they ever robbed this place before? Oh right, only about five people use this bank because nobody wants to remember Baron Kaiser... Apparently there's something in the vault that Pupa wants, and Gamzee would recognize it, for some reason.

Nepeta crept around the back and climbed onto the roof and through the comically

oversized air vent. It's almost big enough for Lord English to fit through it. Gamzee stayed in the lobby and waited in line, since there wasn't much else to do.

Nepeta dove through the spinning blades of a fan... well, they were spinning very slowly so the dive was unnecessary, but if you're going to break into a place, you should do it properly. She used her soft soled shoes to sneak through the vent shafts (which wound about like a flipping labyrinth) without making noise, and found a grate to the vault room. She looked through the grate to see Gamzee being led to the vault by an employee, and being given an item which apparently Pupa needed... What the hell is with this place?

ThAnKs MoThErFuCkEr, I'lL gEt ThIs To PuPa AsAp...

The employee said, "No trouble at all sir, though please exit through the alternate entrance, we use it for... well... clients that the general public might not want to associate with."

No PrObLeM mY mAn...

The employee pushed a button and the grate in front of Nepeta opened, and the employee eyed her uninterestedly.

"I assume this is your... partner in crime, Mr. Gamzee?"

YeAh MoThErFuCkEr, ThAt'S hEr...

"Well Miss, please use the button to your right to call an employee if you need to access the vault, we know you could break in, but it's much more convenient for everyone if we don't have to fix the locks or replace heavy duty hinges..."

He gestured to the small black button on the wall just inside the grate.

"If that is all, then please get going, we have more clients scheduled in a few hours and we would hate for a gang fight to break out in our vent system... Just turn left, then right, then left again to reach the exit"

The employee left the room, and the vent grate closed behind Gamzee. Nepeta looked at him inquisitively.

I jUsT tOId hIm PuPa SeNt Me AnD hE rUsHeD mE tHe FuCk BaCk HeRe, I gOt ThE tHiNg HeRe

He held out a china plate with gold trim... Apparently the big mission was to pick up some plateware... The two left through the vent via the employee's instructions, which was much faster than the way Nepeta had come the first time through.

Meanwhile, with Terezi and Karkat...

HU... HU... HU... G3TT1NG T1R3D Y3T?

HEH... HEH... HEH... YOU WISH, PYROPE! *cough*

The two were swinging with much less vigor now, and the weapons bounced off each other with much less noise...

Ok, II'm puttiing an end to thii2....

:33 < Nooo! Karkitty! Run!

Nepeta kicked Sollux in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and Gamzee grabbed Nepeta and Karkat and hauled them back to Nitram Manor. Both Terezi and Sollux were left to catch their breathe...

pant *pant* You ok4y, 4ppl3b3rry?

cough *cough* II'm fiine, you may want to have Kanaya look at tho2e cut2, you seem to have more teal on your uniiform than you 2hould...

Cuts?

Terezi looked down at her body and noticed a large amount of her teal blood leaking out of cuts and scrapes on her body.

That adrenaliine ii2 a kiicker, eh? I ju2t hope we can get back to headquarter2 before you-

Then Terezi fainted.

Dammiit

Meanwhile, in Gamzee's arms while he runs to Nitram Manor...

Karkitty! You're bleeding! Doesn't it hurt?

Nevermind that, did anything happen on this mission of yours?

NaH MoThErFuCkEr, ThEy JuSt GaVe Us ThIs NiCe PLAtE...

Ok, I think I'll just... take a break now...

Then Karkat fainted. And Nepeta shouted for Gamzee to hurry up.

Later in Nitram Manor

Tavros is finishing up cleaning and dressing Karkat's wounds in one of the guest bathrooms, which happened to be nearby when Gamzee reached Tavros. Cuts, in addition to some shallow stab wounds have been mended, and luckily missed all the important bits.

kARKAT, i DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO TELL ME WHY YOU CAME HOME LOOKING LIKE A CHUNK OF FRESH HAMBURGER MEAT, BUT YOU NEED TO PROMISE YOU WON'T BE DOING IT AGAIN

I don't want to make any promises I don't know if I can keep, but I can promise I won't do it on purpose...

gOOD ENOUGH, nOW, dOCTOR'S ORDERS: gET SOME BED REST AND TAKE A FEW WEEKS OFF OF WHATEVER JOB HAS YOU RUNNING AROUND THE CITY.

Sure... I guess

aND I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF TELLING NEPETA TO MAKE SURE YOU DO

What?

:33 < Karkitty! Are you ready for bed?

Wait, just let me-

Nepeta picked up Karkat and carried him to his bedroom. As she carried him off, Tavros could almost hear Karkat yelling profanities at him from down the hall. Almost. Tavros washed off the equipment he had used and dropped it on the plate Gamzee had given him.

And at the ACPD....

Terezi's wounds ended up being several shallow cuts, missing all vital parts... well, a

finger or two had to be reattached, but in the name of justice no pain was too great.
Terezi, You Should Really Take A Few Weeks Off Patrolling. Maybe Just Stay Behind A
Desk For A Month Or Two To Make Sure Your Wounds Heal Properly
But, But... Th3r3's just1c3 to do! Who w1ll p4trol th3 c1ty 4nd stop cr1m3 1f not me
4nd 4ppl3b3rry?
The Commissioner Has Scheduled You And Sollux To Back Office Duty Starting
Tomorrow, Meanwhile Officers Zahhak And Megido Will Be On Patrol
Work2 for me

Even later...

Who put all these needles and cotton swabs on my artifact?

"Silket Net" by Wigmund

He hated it whenever someone barged in whenever he has having dinner. It was so cliched. Just like those damned telemarketers, always calling just as he was served his meals. Vigilantes were worse, they left a mess all over his estate.

Especially after the staff arrived to remove the body.

Tavros Nitram, sole heir to the vast Nitram fortune after the tragic murder of his parents by a deranged consort and now one of Alternia City's most beloved philanthropists, put down his utensils, looked forlornly at his medium-rare wagyu and the exquisite sides that beautifully complimented the expensive meal and then up at his latest guest.

It was The Magpie, latest and quickly becoming the most violent vigilante in the city. Like every other crime fighter in the city, she had decided to take down the infamous criminal mastermind, Mr Pupa. He listened to the staff radio as they yelled about the damage to the finely crafted antique front doors of his ancestral mansion - it was going to cost yet another fortune to repair those - and about the path of bodies she left on the way up to his personal chambers. He sighed, those fools hadn't caught on that she was already in his presence.

Right where he wanted her.

The one good thing about these interruptions is that it allowed Tavros to lay out The Game to those who deigned to join it. Everyone must know the rules. Can't have people just running around slashing and robbing others willy-nilly.

It was dreadfully untidy.

The Magpie jumped upon Nitram's thousand-year old solid oak desk. Those boot marks were going to be so hard for the maids to remove. Pulled out her energy sword and pointed at the crippled troll.

"You know why I've come."

"i...uH...cAN'T IMAGINE WHY YOU WOULD BARGE INTO MY ESTATE, DESTROYING PRICELESS ANTIQUES THAT HAVE BELONGED TO MY FAMILY FOR GENERATIONS, MURDER MY HOUSE STAFF AND THEN CONFRONT ME WITH AN ADVANCED PERSONAL WEAPON."

He took a sip of wine.

"uM, wOULD YOU CARE TO EXPLAIN YOURSELF?"

The Magpie jumped off the desk and started to circle Tavros, keeping her blade pointed at him all the while.

"Drop the act. You're the criminal mastermind Mr Pupa."

"rEALLY?"

"You're singlehandedly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of this beautiful city's citizens, not to mention the untold numbers of consorts."

"dO GO ON."

"You're a threat to this city and to its future, and because of that I am here to take you down."

"tO THE FUTURE? i DIDN'T, uH, REALIZE THAT THERE WERE PLANS THAT DID THAT. i GUESS THEY NEED REVIEW."

As the Magpie crossed in front of his desk, Tavros raised a hand and gestured to a seat behind her.

"pLEASE, mISS...uH..."

"I am The Magpie."

"wELL, mISS tHE mAGPIE, cOULD YOU PLEASE TAKE A SEAT. aS YOU CAN SEE, i...uH...aM JUST A POOR CRIPPLE AND YOUR PACING AROUND ME MAKES IT SO DREADFULLY HARD TO HOLD A DECENT CONVERSATION WITH YOU."

"I'm not here to talk."

Tavros smiled at her.

"yES YOU ARE, oTHERWISE YOU WOULD HAVE ALREADY CUT ME DOWN."

"No...I..."

"wOULD YOU KINDLY TAKE A SEAT. tHIS WON'T BE LONG."

She sat down and as she did, Tavros retrieved his utensils.

"sO, i...uH...iMAGINE THAT AS A NEWCOMER TO THE CITY AT THIS TIME-"

He started to cut his steak into bite-sized pieces, so tender and juicy. He almost didn't need the knife, but just cutting with a fork was just so debasing to a steak such as wagyu.

"-yOU, uH, tHOUGHT THAT YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO JUST TAKE DOWN THE INFAMOUS mR pUPA."

"Why not."

He took a bite and relished it as he slowly chewed the meat. He washed down the bite with another sip of wine.

"aND LIKE EVERYONE ELSE THAT HAS COME BEFORE YOU, yOU LOOK AT THE PHOTOS OF mR pUPA AND THINK 'mY GOODNESS, tHAT'S tAVROS nITRAM!'"

The Magpie leaned back in her chair, rested her elbows upon the armrests and propped her head upon her knuckles.

"Of course, it's a terrible easy facade to see through."

He continued eating his meals as she continued.

"You play up the pathetic cripple act to keep people away as Tavros Nitram, even though your cybernetic legs work just fine and you can more than handle yourself..."

"hUH, i CAN HANDLE MYSELF, cAN I NOT mISS mAGGIE?"

The Magpie stopped cold.

"How..."

Tavros gave the vigilante a sympathetic and forlorn sigh. He always hated when he had to do this to people, but it was always needed to keep order and civility. But first, another bite of his delicious meal.

"nOW, nOW MY DEAR. tHERE'S NO NEED TO WORRY YOURSELF, uH, oVER SUCH SMALL DETAILS AS YOUR NAME OR THE LOCATION OF YOUR HIDEAWAY WITHIN THE IOST DISTRICT."

A sip of wine and a kind smile.

"yOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO WORRY ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO YOUR IDENTITY IF SOMEHOW THE aLTERNIA cITY pOLICE dEPARTMENT FOUND OUT IF SOMETHING TERRIBLY UNFORTUNATE HAPPENED TO CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS."

The Magpie started to get up.

"Go ahead, I have nothing to fear from-"

"aND IT WOULD BE MOST DREADFUL IF SOMETHING MOST TRAGIC HAPPENED TO THAT LITTLE GANG THAT THE INFAMOUS mR pUPA EMPLOYS FROM TIME TO TIME."

She stopped moving and started to breathe heavily. Good.

"wHO IS THE LEADER OF THAT GROUP OF RUFFIANS? oH, uH, yES - kARKAT - tHAT'S IT."

"iT WOULD BE SO SAD IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO THEM, eSPECIALLY SINCE THAT YOUNG CAT GIRL STILL HASN'T FULLY RECOVERED FROM THE INJURIES YOU INFLICTED UPON HER."

Tavros smiled at the Magpie and motioned that she should sit back down.

"aDDITIONALLY, tHERE ARE SO MANY TRAGIC THINGS THAT COULD HAPPEN TO THAT YOUNG dAVID sTRIDER FELLOW. eVEN THOUGH THERE IS NO POSSIBLE WAY THAT HE COULD BE EITHER THE dON OF THE sTRIDER mAFIA OR THE VIGILANTE WITH A BIRD THEME REMARKABLY SIMILAR TO YOURS, cROWbRO, aNYONE COULD SUFFER AN ACCIDENT AT ANY TIME."

Her breathing quickened, but then she stopped and forced herself to calm down.

Tavros took the time to try out these sides the chef had included with his main meal.

Tavros relished the glorious wonders his kitchen staff had put upon his plate this night.

"aLSO, i BELIEVE THAT THERE'S THAT FINE POLICE OFFICER AND THE PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR OF THE apd, uH, mISS tEREZI pYROPE AND THAT ENTERPRISING INVENTOR CURRENTLY WORKING WITH THE MILITARY AT fORT sKAIAN, mADAME jADE hARLEY."

Brown gloved hands gripped the armrests of the chair set opposite Tavros.

"What makes you think I care about them?"

"uM, nO PARTICULAR REASON. i WAS, uH, jUST REMARKING THAT THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE IN THIS CITY THAT COULD MEET TRAGIC ACCIDENTS DEPENDING UPON EVENTS ELSEWHERE."

He smiled at the Magpie.

"iF YOU CATCH MY DRIFT, mY DEAR."

The Magpie got up from the seat and started to slowly back away from the crippled troll. He just smiled at her and continued to munch away at his meal.

"oH NO DEAR, uH, i HAVEN'T FINISHED YET. pLEASE STAY."

Now that he had the Magpie right where he wanted her, Tavros decided that this was the time to let her know how things worked.

"uNFORTUNATELY, tHAT'S NOT A REQUEST."

He pushed his meal to the side and leaned upon his hands, looking at what had barged into his room and decided that she could threaten him.

"aS I SAID, tHERE ARE MANY PEOPLE IN THIS CITY THAT COULD HAVE TRAGIC THINGS HAPPEN TO THEM."

i WISH YOU WOULD REMEMBER THIS AS YOU KEEP EVERYONE, INCLUDING MYSELF, sAFE."

The Magpie clenched her fists and shook with fury.

"nOW, nOW, yOU REALLY SHOULD, uH, LEARN TO KEEP THAT TEMPER UNDER CONTROL."

He gestured at the doorway.

"yOU LEFT SUCH A DREADFUL MESS OUTSIDE.

iF YOU HAD JUST KNOCKED AND REQUESTED AN AUDIENCE WITH ME, i WOULD HAVE BEEN, uH, mORE THAN HAPPY TO MEET YOU."

Tavros pulled his dinner back in front of himself.

"bUT, uNFORTUNATELY, i AM OCCUPIED AT THIS TIME. bUT IF YOU WANT TO HAVE A, uH, cIVILIZED CONVERSATION WITH ME AT A LATER DATE-"

He paused for effect and took a sip of wine.

"-yOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME. hAVE A GOOD DAY, mA'AM."

And with that, she left as quickly as she had arrived. Tavros picked up the handset on the security radio and told his staff to allow the Magpie to leave without trouble.

He picked at his steak. It had gone cold during the conversation.

Pity.

He called up one of his butlers, who started to clean the mess left in the master's chamber. While this happened, Tavros rolled himself up to a display case that showed Alternia City and its surroundings in perfect three-dimensional detail, all the buildings, all the roads, even the trees in the parks, all in perfect scaled-down detail.

Next to this map was a complicated chess board not adorned with chess figurines, but small exquisitely detailed replicas of the city's major players. He reached into the case and retrieved the figurine of the CrowBro and looked it over. He turned around to the butler, who was preparing to leave the room and beckoned him.

"wOULD YOU, uH, pLEASE CONTACT MY FIGURINE MAKER?
i HAVE A NEW ORDER FOR THEM."

"DOOF Hard" by Wigmund

It was the holidays in Alternia City. All through the town, people were getting ready for the festivities of Four Saints Day, a hyper commercialized callback of the Trolls' mating system before the destruction of their old breeding pits centuries ago, forcing the race to do it just like everyone else. Cards displaying the symbols of Saint Matias Prit, Saint Kisem Sys, Saint Moira Rile and Saint Austin Pace were in every shopping center in town along with stuffed Drone dolls that said a variety of redrom or blackrom related phrases when you pulled on its buckets. Schools were out for the week surrounding the holiday and many of the Glass City's premier firms were holding office Four Saints parties.

Most trolls have forgotten about the reason for the season, but Sergeant Equius Zahhak had not. His family had continued to cling to the old ways...or at least honor them since the true die-hards died out centuries ago when they couldn't breed. They embraced the four quadrants of the Saints of Old, they honored the blood system, they tried as much as possible to avoid interaction with low-bloods and other non-trolls and above all they longed for a day when the Majestic Empress would return.

However, the recent demise of most of the world's luscii due to an unexpected plague that originated from the very city they lorded over had emotionally and psychologically ruined the House of Zahhak. They had degenerated so far that one of their own was serving those foolish scum as a third-rate protector. Equius had tried to explain to his Genetic Donors that this was a truly noble profession. But they only rebuffed him and almost cast him out of the family. He would have been if his slurry-mate, formally one of the greatest cyberneticians in the world, had not been brutally murdered.

Reflecting on this, Equius drove his patrol car through the Glass City, making sure that none of the gutter-scum deigned to rudely interrupt the frivolities of their betters. Despite having a rank that meant he could have just sat in APD HQ and ordered some other officer to do this patrol, Equius loved to do the Glass City patrol. He actually loved to see the wonders that Trolls of all types, Humans, the Carapaces and even the Consorts could build when they worked together for the greater good.

Thinking such lewd thoughts also made him sweat. It was so decadent and betrayed his family's core beliefs.

"YOu're sweating again, aren't yOu?"

Equius looked out the corner of his broken shades at his partner, the soulbot Aradia Megido. Together they made up the core of the Alternia City Police Department's Division Of Overwhelming Force or DOOF for short. She had been the former squad partner of Officer Sollux Captor and it was widely believed that they were starting to form a romantic relationship, but then there was a horrific accident that left Officer Megido in a permanent coma. No amount of ectotechnology was able to break the sleep, so Officer Zahhak suggested that his brother build a cyberorganic shell for the incapacitated officer and they extract her soul into it. The operation was a success...in a way...her soulbot awoke with all the memories that Officer Megido had up to the accident, but none of her exuberant and joyful personality. Officer Captor refused to

work with her, so he was assigned to work with the loose cannon Officer Terezi Pyrope and Officer Aradia Megido was assigned to work with Sergeant Zahhak in DOOF.

"D--> It's the air controls of this ground vehicle, it's always too hot in here for me."

"SO it has n0thing with y0u thinking ab0ut s0mething decadent again?"

"D--> Of course not. I am a e%emplar of moral unrighteousness and STRENGTH in this city of f001s and low-b100ds."

Aradia just gave him her usual 0_0 look and then went back to using the technology built into her shell to scan for any disturbances in the area. Equius continued to watch her on the sly, while trying to keep the patrol car on the road. He found her fascinating. He always had, but she had been a low-blood before her accident and that was not a line the high-blooded Zahhak would cross. But her new form had been constructed and filled with blood fit for even the House of Makara. She may have despised him for being a typical member of the high Houses when she was truly alive, but she had developed feelings for her partner since her conversion. It may have been something under the graces of Saint Sys instead of the graces of Saint Prit that Equius found himself dealing with, but he tried to make it work.

It was an interesting relationship.

As they neared the corporate headquarters of the Nakdoofenpap Corporation, Aradia's eyes lit up as she received a message from HQ. Apparently there was a disturbance report at the building and they wanted someone nearby to go check it out. Equius had Aradia confirm the request and to relay that they were responding to it as they pulled up to the front of the building.

Equius got out of the car and carefully rapped on the reinforced frame of the locked glass doors. It didn't even dent. He was rather surprised, but many of the corporate headquarters had been reinforced due to the prevalence of super gangs and the MANGRIT infused in the city.

A man at the security station jerked to attention, buzzed open the doorway and motioned the APD officer inside.

Equius walked up to the security officer and rested his arms upon the massive console lined with security monitors. Equius glanced down to see that there was a Four Saints party going on somewhere up above them.

"D--> We received a report that there was a disturbance here.

D--> Is everything alright?"

The security officer adjusted the ill-fitting collar of his uniform and smiled at Zahhak.

"No sir, everything's fine here. Maybe there was a spark in our alarm system that alerted you guys at the APD. Sorry about that, I'll tell the tech guys to make sure their shit works."

Equius nodded at the guard and started to make his way back to his patrol car.

"D--> Well then, I apologize for my intruscion and I wish you a joyous Four Saints Day."

Equius made it out the door when he noticed that his partner had rolled down the window and was looking straight up. He turned to follow her gaze and noticed something odd up towards the roof of the tower.

Several windows were broken out and it looked like some drapes were dangling from them.

He looked at the ground around the car and only then noticed the glass scattered on the ground. He was so used to crunching sounds under his feet that he had not noticed the debris.

"D--> What do you make of it Officer Megido?"

"Obviously something is going on here."

Equius turned around to return to the security station when he saw three individuals in the lobby pointing what appeared to be a high-end rocket launcher at him and his patrol car.

Equius barely managed to dodge out of the way as the rocket smashed through the glass door, carried the patrol car across the driveway that looped in front of the skyscraper and exploded spectacularly. He got up and raced to the car to check on his squad mate.

His concern was abated when she pried her way from the twisted wreckage, her uniform mostly burned off revealing the exquisite workmanship Equius' slurry mate had put into the construction of her form. So life-like.

Equius then turned around and started to charge the three who tried to harm both himself and Officer Megido. But as he ran towards the doorway, the shutters were activated and it sealed up. Equius braced himself and ran onwards, only to bounce off of the reinforced metal, barely leaving a dent at full charge.

He looked up the tower's side and saw that the windows too were shuttering up. Whoever had attacked them had activated the tower's defenses.

"D--> Officer Megido."

"Yes sir?"

"D--> Fly me up to the roof top and then set up surveillance on one of the nearby towers."

"I'm okay with that. Do you wish me to contact HQ and tell them of the circumstances."

"D--> After you drop me off up there."

Aradia grabbed the burly Sergeant and flew up into the air using the psionic powers that she possessed in life. She dropped him off at what appeared to be a hovervehicle platform and then departed to the nearest tower which was over a block away. The green space surrounding this building was going to make it difficult for the APD to approach Equius thought.

Good thing their best officer was already here.

He took off his uniform top so that he was wearing the black, tight tank top he favored so much and set off to find a way into the tower.

He tried the main doors. Dammit, sealed as well. He couldn't break through.

This embarrassed him. He was the STRONGEST officer of the APD and he was hindered by some corporation's metal grating.

That embarrassment was only compounded when he heard someone land on the roof top behind him.

"Need some help officer?"

Equius turned around to view that one of the city's more consistent heroes, Egbertman had arrived. Just great.

"D--> This is a matter for the Alternia City Police Department and the Division Of Overwhelming Force.

D--> We do not require the assistance of a vigilante every time we face difficulties."

Egbertman shrugged his shoulders, causing the reinforced warhammer he rested upon them to shift.

"Looks like you're having trouble opening that door. I saw the blast below and decided to see what was going on.

When I got closer, I then noticed that robot chick that dropping you off up here."

"D--> That 'robot chick' you refer too is Officer Aradia Megido.

D--> Please do not debase her by forgetting that."

"Sorry about that. Anyways, you need help opening that door?"

Equius frowned at the vigilante.

"D--> If I cannot open this doorway with my considerable STRENGTH, then I doubt that you can."

"I don't plan on opening it..."

Egbertman walked up to the doorway, idly swinging his hammer in both hands.

"I plan on smashing it down!"

He swung the hammer with all his might and hit the door.

And dented it.

He looked at the door in amazement.

"Well shit. That doesn't happen often."

"D--> I believe we must find another way into the tower.

D--> We have to figure out what's going on in there and who these people are that attacked my partner and myself."

"I guess there might be an air vent somewhere up here. We can crawl in through that. They couldn't have sealed off the place completely without leaving some breathing holes for themselves."

"D--> This is so disgusting, entering a building in the manner of common criminals.

D--> It makes me sweat just thinking about it."

"I see...and smell..."

Well, it'll make it easier for you to squirm through the pipes with your huge frame."

Equius sneered at the smaller Egbertman. He hated this, working with a vigilante and having to sneak inside. So degrading. So debasing. So decadent.

They searched for awhile before Equius found what they were looking for. He called

over the vigilante and together they managed to pry loose the vent's cover. Equius looked down into the vent.

It went straight down what looked like the entire height of the building. Great. They'd have to work their way back up to reach the front security desk, let alone the office party. He could take the fall, he could take whatever was thrown at him, he just realized that this was going to take the entire night and he had wanted to try to spend some time with his partner on Four Saints Day.

"D--> Are you ready Egbertman?"

The hero clipped his hammer and tucked in away so that he could easily climb through the vents.

"Yippiee-ki-yay motherfucker."

Equius clambered into the pipe and let himself fall down into the darkness. As he did so he muttered to himself.

"D--> Such crude language..."

"DOOF Harder" by Wigmund

Sergeant Zahhak landed hard in the darkness that lay far below Nakdoofenpap Tower. He lifted his broken shades so his troll night vision could help him find a way out of where ever it was he landed. Equius moved out from under the air shaft just in time for Egbertman to land where he was standing.

"Shit it's dark."

"D--> Indeed."

"Well, is there a way out of this place?"

"D--> Indeed."

"Can you actually speak to me and explain stuff?"

Equius didn't respond. Instead he moved deeper into the darkness, leaving Egbertman blind and alone.

"Aren't you a helpful one..."

He stopped when he heard the creak of metal and a doorway opened up. He couldn't see where it was.

"D--> I have found an exit, Egbertman. Follow me."

"Yeah...I can't see a damned thing. Care to help a blind man out?"

Equius sighed, walked over the Egbertman and pushed him in the direction of the door. He was surprised when the hero responded as if he had just lightly tapped him on the shoulder. Such POWER...

"D--> This was human. There's a doorway that leads into what I shall assume is the maintenance level below the Tower."

Equius guided Egbertman through the doorway and into the dark hall. He let Egbertman find his bearings using a nearby wall while he tried to figure out which way they should go.

"D--> Stay here while I scout ahead."

"No need for that, there's a light switch right here."

"D--> A what-"

Equius found himself blinded by the sudden arrival of light. It hurt his eyes.

Egbertman was over by some switches, turned to look at Equius, and stopped cold.

The lights went back out.

"Oh...wow...."

"D--> You f001! Why didn't you warn me that you were going to turn those on?"

"Sorry about that. I'm going to turn them back on in a second. Please put your shades back on."

"Oh for the love of gog, put those shades back on."

"D--> Whatever human, my shades are back on. You may re-activate those lights."

The lights flicked back on and Equius noticed Egbertman was pale as a sheet.

"D--> Are you well enough to proceed?"

"Yeah, just give me a moment."

Eventually, the hero composed himself and the two found their way out of the maintenance bay and discovered an elevator.

"Sub-level 48? Damn that's deep. So, shall we make this journey much shorter and use the elevator?"

"D--> I don't trust it, but I want to get this tribulation over with as soon as possible."

Egbertman hit the elevator up button and the two waited for their ride to show up.

Far above the two, someone sitting in the security offices noticed a light flash on a panel that tracked the use of elevators within Nakdoofenpap Tower. The man got up from his seat watching the gathering police blockade outside on the security cameras and walked over to the panel.

He wiped off the blood from the previous occupants of the office from the panel and read with alarm that someone was using the elevators from so far below the Tower.

He grabbed his comm, "Hey boss, looks like we have someone down below trying to crash the party."

Further up in the tower, a man in a business suit surrounded by armed mercenaries picked up his own comm and listened to his associate in the security offices. He smiled slyly. Someone got inside. Must have been the same people who triggered the alarm on the rooftop air vent. That blue-blooded police officer? He heard about how tough that one was.

He activated the comm, "Wait until it nears the main lobby and then blow the lift, dropping it down the shaft."

His suggestion was met with an affirmative response from the other end of the comm.

The man put away the comm, but quickly picked it back up when it started to crackle again.

"Who is this? Who's trying to contact me? Lobby? Security Office?"

There was silence for a moment, then a voice came drifting over the radio.

"T00k me l0ng en0ugh t0 crack the signal used by y0ur radi0s."

"Who is this? Identify yourself."

"This is Officer Aradia Megid0 Of the Division Of Overwhelming F0rce Of the Alternia City P0lice Department. I rec0mmend that y0u and y0ur c0h0rts surrender peacefully."

The man laughed and so did his comrades that could hear the radio. The people that had been expecting a nice Four Saints party cringed in fear as they did so. Several of them looked at the bloody messes suspended from the ceiling as 'examples' of what happened when they didn't cooperate with their new hosts.

"Ah, Officer Megido. The APD's resident chrome job."

"I am n0t 0kay with that slur."

"And I'll make sure to not care about that robot."

The man picked up the comm and walked into the corporate offices his group were using to plan out this event. He sat down at the desk of the Vice President of the company, the former VP wasn't going to be using it anymore or ever again. The man

rubbed the desk top. Such a pity, it will be so hard for the cleaners to remove those blood stains and bullets scars from the solid oak top.

"I will ask again: Surrender n0w Or face the c0nsequences Of y0ur acti0ns."

Another laugh from the man. Aradia, sitting on a rooftop that gave her an excellent view of the Nakdoofenpap Tower and its surroundings would have frowned if she could have. She disliked this. Something was wrong.

"I'm sure we will my former lady. But for now, why don't you keep yourself busy and tell your fellow APD officers to keep back from the Tower."

She could hear the man smirk over the radio broadcast.

"We don't want to have any more accidents like there was earlier with that patrol car."

"That was my patr0l car that was destr0yed. I did n0t appreciate that."

"Ah, then I guess your partner is the one currently infesting the air vents."

There was a pause and she could barely make out the man talking to someone near him.

"Well, that's a real pity. Because your partner is about to die."

She heard the radio on his end switch to another channel, which didn't stop her from listening in.

"Attention my friends, we've got a little birdie on our shoulders, so watch what you say."

Another voice popped up, "The elevator's approaching the lobby. Drop it?"

The leader responded with a simple, "Yes".

Aradia quickly tried to contact Equius. But his location was shielding him from receiving any communications. She sighed and then contacted the officer leading the ever growing police blockade around the Tower.

"I've just been advised by the men currently in c0ntr0l Of the T0wer that y0u all sh0uld keep y0ur distance."

"Whatever Officer Megido, we'll listen to those assholes when the HorrorTerrors arrive."

Aradia sighed and then went back to monitoring the hostage taker's radio. Commissioner AR was here, not good.

Deep inside the Tower, Equius and Egbertman waited patiently as the elevator slowly rose from the depths below the Tower and neared the Lobby.

"This is taking forever."

"D--> Indeed."

"Could you stop saying that?"

Equius was about to respond, but the two mangrit-infused individuals stumbled as the elevator suddenly stopped.

"D--> This is most une%pected..."

"What's going-"

Egbertman was cut off when they heard a series of small explosions around them.

"Oh shit."

And with that, the elevator plummeted back into the darkness.

"DOOF Hard With A Vengeance" by Wigmund

The elevator car plummeted down the forty-some-odd levels that separated it from the bottom of the shaft where it smashed itself into unidentifiable twisted debris. Nothing moved in or around it, all was silent.

The terrorist leader smiled when he got confirmation that the elevator was smashed at the bottom of the shaft, "Did you hear that Officer Megido? It seems that your partner just experienced his sudden downfall."

"That joke was terrible, but I really don't care about that."

"Your words hurt me. What do you care about robot? Please be quick, I have so much to do in here."

"That Sergeant Zahhak and a man I'll assume is Egbertman would have survived that fall, if not escaped the elevator during its rapid descent."

The leader paused and thought about that, then he contacted all of his agents inside the Tower, "Attention men, we need someone to go check the elevator shaft below the lobby, we may have monkeys clambering up it."

"Afraid?"

"No, just cautious. Too many people have a lot invested in what goes on here for this event to fail," and with that he turned off his radio.

He turned to his lieutenant, "Have everyone switch to the secured channels. We're entering the final phase."

About a dozen levels below the lobby, a hammer was being used to support two men dangling from a support beam on the elevator shaft's wall.

"Well that was pretty exciting."

"D--> Cease your foolishness, we need to get out of this shaft before the criminals decide they need to double check our presumed demise."

"Alright, let me swing you over to that door."

Egbertman swung the troll who was dangling from his legs towards the door, which he opened. The hero lobbed himself through the open doorway when the troll was out of the way.

"D--> Sub-level 13, closer but we still have a ways to go."

"Stairs?"

"D--> %actly."

The two made their way towards the emergency stairwell but stopped when they heard someone coming down.

"Security said the open door was on this level."

Egbertman and Equius both hid themselves.

"Looks like we have company."

"D--> Quite. Don't alert them to our presence."

They watched as three heavily armed men entered the level and made their way to the elevator shaft. One looked up and down it while his compatriots stood guard over him.

"No one in here. Let's sweep the level."

They split up and started to thoroughly search the area.

"D--> You take the one nearest the elevator shaft, I'll take to one closest to the

stairwell and then we'll both go after the man in the middle."

"Cool plan, let's do this."

The man near the elevator shaft turned when he felt a gust of air beside him. He found himself face to face with some derpy kid in a blue hood. The man started to bring his gun to bear when the kid hit him hard in the chest with the end of a sledgehammer and knocked him down the shaft. His gun blazing as he screamed in terror.

The other two men turned towards the elevator shaft and saw Egbertman worriedly looking down the shaft at the falling man.

"Oh gog, that was an accident..."

The two leveled their guns and were ready to fire when Equius tore through a divider wall and STRONG tackled his target.

"D--> GET DOWN!"

Egbertman fell to the floor as a fusillade of bullets tore into the wall above him and then started to track to where Equius was. When the man was pre-occupied with trying to kill Sergeant Zahhak, Egbertman lobbed his hammer at the man, crushing his shoulder and knocking him out cold.

"Yes! Didn't kill that one."

Equius picked up one of the weapons the men were using. This wasn't stuff you found in the hands of any of the criminal gangs of the city, sure they had access to plenty of military hardware, but this was something beyond that.

"D--> Something strange is going on here. This is not something I've seen before."

"What do you mean? Maybe they just found something special before they decided to take over the Tower."

Equius shook his head and pointed at several spots on the 'gun'.

"D--> No maker's marks, no indication of an identification number being filed off, nothing indicating that this gun was ever in the hands of the military or a criminal organization. Plus..."

He tossed the gun to Egbertman.

"D--> Try to fire the gun at me."

"Uh...guns aren't my thing and I know we're tough, but bullets still hurt and kill."

"D--> JUST PULL THE TRIGGER YOU F001!"

Egbertman pointed the gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. He squinted, but nothing happened. No clicks, nothing.

"Out of bullets?"

"D--> No, full clip from the man I tackled. There's a genetic lock on the gun."

"A whatsit?"

Equius sighed and took the gun back, he turned it so Egbertman could look at the trigger mechanism closely. There were several slots where a wielder's fingers would rest and it looked like there was little computer chips in the bottom of each one.

"D--> Genetic locks, the guns are secured to a specific individual or groups of individuals to prevent them from being used by unauthorized persons. E%pensive and only used by certain groups."

"Like who? Special forces and other secret government groups that watch us from the shadows?"

He started to laugh but stopped when Equius just stared at him. Oh god, what the hell was going on here?

They both froze when they heard something start to squawk on one of the fallen men, "Search Team Zeta, report in. Report in Search Team Zeta. Have you located the intruders? Repeat, have you located the intruders?"

"Oh god, does that mean there are more teams like this looking for us?"

"D--> Yes, and most likely they'll know we're coming as well. Let's get this over with as quickly as possible."

Egbertman nodded his head and the two went up the stairwell.

Far above them, the leader looked over his hands at the crowd gathered outside the office he was using. They were nothing more than office workers and executives who had gathered to celebrate Four Saints Day, they were scared, they were frightened and from the smell drifting in, many of them had soiled themselves at some point.

"So Search Team Zeta was taken out on Sub-Level 13? Have the men prepare an ambush in the main lobby. All the stairwells leading from those levels enter and exit at one point and the lobby's reinforced so those two can't break through the walls."

His lieutenant saluted him and then went off to relay orders.

The leader got up and walked over to a sealed off area of the executive suites that all of this was going down on. A group of his men were clustered around a sealed vault. A large laser drill was slowly, but steadily, melting it's way through the wall just around the door.

"How long until we can enter the vault?"

"Should be an hour or so. That's assuming it's the same thickness all the way around."

The leader nodded at his team, "Good, see if you can't speed that up though, we have company down stairs and I doubt we have that hour you need."

He walked back into the office and glanced at his lieutenant, "What's the status with the police outside?"

"They're holding their distance, we think the robot warned them off. But it looks like federal authorities are trying to push their way in."

"If they get too close, have the sentries open fire."

"Yes sir."

The leader of the group sat down at the desk again and rubbed his fingers in the blood-stained bullet holes on the desk top. "This was supposed to be a covert operation."

Back in the sub-levels, Sergeant Zahhak and Egbertman were surprised at how easy their ascension was at this point.

"Wow, I'm liking this."

"D--> It's been too easy. They must be waiting for us."

Egbertman reached the doorway that led into the lobby and turned to laugh at Equius.

"You're being paranoid. They're terrified that we'll kick their asses."

He opened the door and their jaws dropped as they saw what was waiting for them.

Over a dozen men, with bigger guns than the ones below were using, all aimed right at them.

"Open fire!"

"Live Free or DOOF Hard" by Wigmund

Equius slammed the door shut just in time, a veritable hailstorm of bullets of various calibers embedded themselves into its other side and the wall surrounding it.

"D--> You sh001d learn to shut your mouth before you cause or foretell more troubles for us you f001."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself...I guess I'm channeling the wrong kind of action movie here."

"D--> This isn't a movie, human. Those are real men, most likely ex-special forces of some kind, and they're trying to kill us.

D--> They are not playing around, this is serious. Get that through your thick head BEFORE I DRIVE IT THROUGH MYSELF!"

The boy looked at Equius for a moment then pulled deep into his hood. The police sergeant could swear he could just make out sniffing over the pounding of the bullets. Egbertman leaned up against the wall and slid down so he was sitting against it. Equius thanked the Grubs he was quiet and tried to sort out their situation.

They were stuck at the top of the only stairwell that connected the sub-floors to the main portion of the building, the walls were reinforced so the STRONG couldn't just barge their way through and the only thing keeping them from just walking out the door was the fact they'd be cut down in a fraction of a second by the force waiting for them.

Egbertman looked up at the door and then at Sergeant Zahhak's belt.

"Are those smoke grenades?"

Equius pulled himself from his train of thought and looked down at the meager equipment he carried around with himself.

"D--> Yes..."

"Do you think you could pull the door from its hinges?"

"D--> The door's reinforced! There's no way I could do--"

Equius stopped and stared at the doorway.

Some foolish contractor should have lost their job for what they did here. The door and the walls around it were reinforced. But the door's frame and the hinges were most obviously not.

"D--> I see your plan and I think it might work. Good job Egbertman."

The man commanding the terrorists in the lobby ordered everyone to stop firing. It was obvious their targets had pulled back and there was no reason to waste more bullets. He started to go for his comm, but then there was a horrible screeching sound from the door they dented up with their gunfire. It shifted its frame and then came loose.

Oh fuck, they had a shield.

"Everyone, grenades behind that door!"

They started to comply when two cylinders rolled out from behind the door. Oh shit...

"Smoke grenades!"

The two grenades exploded, filling the area around them with thick smoke. But that was just the beginning, a breeze swept the smoke around the lobby so everything was concealed in the acrid haze.

"The cop's got Egbertman with him! Open fire when you see them!"

That was when the fun started.

As soon as Egbertman whipped the smoke around the room, Equius threw the door at the area he last remember having the largest cluster of terrorists. Screams of terror and pain indicated he hit something. He looked at Egbertman and the two nodded at each other and then split up.

Gunfire lit up the smoke-filled room like a disco as the men started firing at fast-moving shadows. A scream of pain and the sound of either a meaty fist or a sledgehammer meeting someone's body started to take its toll on the men's morale and composure.

Equius slide behind the front desk as someone managed to find him, the bullets tearing through the cheap wood. Then he heard the clinking noise of something bouncing off the table and then rolling off it and landing right next to him.

"D--> Oh shi-," the explosion threw him across the room where he impacted heavily with a support beam. Metal fragments shredded his clothes and removed his shoes, but thankfully they only left minor scratches and scrapes upon his body. He got up groggily and tried to locate Egbertman by the sound of gunfire and screams of pain.

Egbertman made good use of the large open space of the lobby, these kind of areas where he could use his flight and wind powers were where he shined. Unfortunately, his use of those powers moved the smoke in ways that drew gunfire. Eventually, the lower portion of the lobby was clear, but the balconies were still full. Egbertman made his way to Equius and the two hid behind a pillar.

"So, how do you plan to get them."

Equius looked up towards the balconies through the smoke and then at towards the elevators.

"D--> I don't, let's try getting to the elevators before the smoke clears."

The two slunk along the edges of the lobby towards the elevator and managed to get inside before they heard someone screaming about leaving that path open. Equius hit the button for the executive suites and they headed up.

In the Security Office, the man on watch kept an eye on the security cameras and had a great view of the gun battle. Unfortunately, he also knew when their guests made it into the elevator.

"Hey boss, our guests managed to evade the ambush."

"WHAT?! How did they do that?"

"Looks like the cop had smoke grenades and Egbertman was there as well."

"The fool from SEER? They've taken an interest in this?"

"Looks like it."

"Don't let them reach the executive suites just yet. Stop that elevator on the main office level. I'll have the men there set up some ambushes in the cubicle farms."
"Yes Sir."

When the security office turned off his comm, the leader leaned his head up against clutched hands. This was not good. SEER? They must have found out about this somehow, those fools always tried to secure the artifacts and hide them away somewhere in the city. That inevitably lead to clashes of interest with other parties and would someday lead to an all-out war between them and a certain group.

The terrorist leader smiled as he thought about that. He would love to be there for that operation. But now, it looked like he'd be fortunate to get out of this one alive.

"How much longer until the vault's open?"

"Less than twenty minutes and then we can pop this baby open."

"Good."

Back in the elevator, Equius' police radio sparked to life.

"I guess this means y0u are still alive, Sergeant."

Equius smiled as he picked up the comm.

"D--> Yes, yes I am. It is a good thing to hear your beautiful voice."

"Shut it, y0u're in danger. These men are n0t a mere criminal gang deciding t0 take On a large target."

"D--> We've figured that out on our own Officer Megido. The weapons they're using are too advanced and possess genetic locks."

"..."

"D--> Aradia?"

Silence, then the radio crackled back on.

"That is n0t g00d. We may be stepping On t0es Of f0rces we d0 n0t c0mprehend.

Th0ugh I imagine y0ur new friend might have an idea wh0 these men are."

Equius looked at Egbertman, but he shook his head because he had no idea what the robot was talking about.

"D--> No, he's been just as confused as I am."

"That's n0t g00d."

There was clicking noise coming from Aradia's end of the transmission.

"I believe I've cracked int0 their secured c0mms yet again, I believe they may have further ambushes planned f0r y0u tw0. Enj0y."

Equius put away the radio and leaned against the elevator wall as he tried to catch his breath and recompose himself after being blasted literally out of his shoes.

"D--> Are you sure that you have no idea who these men are?"

"One hundred percent. If I did, I would have happily given that info down in the basement when we first ran into these thugs."

"D--> This is not good then. We're facing heavily armed forces with what appears to be military training and equipment, they've managed to lock Aradia out of their radio transmissions and they've got the high ground."

"We gonna let that stop us?"

Equius smiled grimly.

"D--> Hell no."

Equius hit the emergency stop button before they reached the main office level.

"Why are we stopping here?"

"D--> Security control is on this f100r, I want to knock out their vision before heading onwards."

"Ahh..."

They opened the doors onto the Security level and made their way to the offices.

"Oh shit boss, they're heading my way!"

"Then pull out, leave a rear guard to cover you and make your way up here. We're about to open the vault and then we'll make our escape."

The two heroes rounded the corner of the winding hallways of the level only to find themselves face to face with yet another ambush. They each dove through a different wall and started to force their way towards the group.

The men paced down the hall cautiously, trying to listen for more cracking noises that would help locate their burrowers.

They found them when two meaty arms bust through a wall and grabbed on of them. In a panic, the man opened fire and filled one comrade with bullets before disappearing into the gloom.

"Man down! Man down! We've got one confirmed casualty and the police officer dragged off someone else! We've-"

A light tap from a hammer quited him down.

They opened the doors to the security office and were aghast at the carnage they found inside. The terrorists obviously weren't holding back when they ran into the guards that had secured themselves here. Blood coated most of the control surfaces, put there were areas obviously wiped clean when they were needed. But it looked like the trespassers demolished everything when they left. Equius and Egbertman weren't going to be able to spy upon the intruders like they had been watched.

"Onwards and upwards?"

"D--> It appears so."

The two made their way up from the security level to the main offices just below the executive suites. They stopped when they saw the cubicles that formed a horrifying maze that they'd have to cross to go up further.

"Shit."

Just above them, a large metal door was pulled from its frame and a dozen men looked in awe at what was inside.

"Yes! This men, is what we came here for! The Nakdoofenpap artifact trove! Gather up what we can and we'll make out way to the helipad."

The leader left the vault area and walked out into the party area.

"I regret to inform all of our fine hosts, that will be taking our leave. You are now free

to go."

He smiled as he walked up the stairs towards the helipad with his lieutenant.

"Wait until we lift off and then activate the demolition charges."

"Yes sir."

It was a long, hard slog through the cubicles, but eventually the two made it through. Both heroes were bloodied up from lucky shots, shattered glass and other flying debris that turned the level into a bloody wasteland.

"That was epic."

"D--> Indeed."

"Don't start that up again."

Equius smiled at Egbertman as they made their way up the stairwell towards the floor where the party was taking place.

They ran into the crowd making their way downstairs in a panic.

"What's going on?!"

"They let us go!"

"D--> Where did the terrorists head off to?"

"Helipad!"

The crowd passed Sergeant Zahhak and Egbertman. The two looked at each other and then started to run up the stairs. There was no way that this group was going to let everyone escape alive. Especially not after the party goers got a good look at the faces of their captors.

When they reached the executive suites, the emergency shutters started to lift.

"Why are they doing that?"

"D--> I don't know, but it might not be a good sign."

Equius pulled out his radio and contacted Aradia.

"D--> Aradia, they've opened the emergency shutters and have let the hostages go."

"And I believe they are going to detonate explosive charges and destroy the Tower."

"D--> Is Officer Captor with the blockade?"

"Yes, he is."

"D--> Good, I want you two to find the escaping hostages and fly as many of them out of the tower as possible."

"Yes sir."

Egbertman looked outside and he saw something fly from a nearby tower and down to the police blockade. Down there, a red and blue flash sparked up.

Equius pulled on his shirt and led him through the offices, they found the vault area.

"What in the world was secured here?"

"D--> I don't know, but we'll ask our friends when we reach the helipad."

They ran on and exited through the door where their adventure began.

"So good to meet you Sergeant Equius Zahhak. I've been wanting to meet the man

who has made my life hell for this evening."

The two looked up the stairs leading to the helipad, a bearded man in a business suit looked down at them. So did the business end of a submachine gun. A helicopter was landing on the pad behind him, whipping his hair and tie about. He had manic grin, the grin of someone who was about to deal with the source of their migraines.

"Pity this will be the only time we meet."

He opened fire, Egbertman jumped in front of Equius and took several bullets in the chest. Before he fell over the edge and off the Tower, he threw his hammer at the terrorist leader, knocking the gun from his hands.

Equius roared in anger and charged forward.

"DOOF Hard 24/7" by Wigmund

Equius charged forward as the terrorist reeled back from Egbertman's hammer hitting the gun out of his hands. Equius swung at him, only to find that the man had regained his balanced and dodged out of the way.

"Nice one, Sergeant Zahhak, but I'm afraid I am going to have to delay this dance." The leader started to walk towards the helicopter that the surviving members of his crew had boarded. Equius took a step forward only to stop when someone on board leveled a gun at him. His foot came to rest against the sledgehammer.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have a delivery to make. I can't keep these people waiting." The helicopter started to lift off and the leader turned towards the gun-wielder, "Shoot him."

The man fired, but as he did so Equius kicked the hammer at the helicopter's rotor where it became entangled. The bullet hit Equius in the shoulder.

The helicopter started to spin and tilted over the edge of the helipad. The terrorist leader leapt to safety, landing hard on the helipad as the craft fell to the ground far below where it exploded.

The man got up and dusted himself off, "Well then, that changes my plans."

"D--> You're coming in with me."

The terrorist laughed at Equius and removed his suit jacket and tie.

"You know, I've always wanted to go toe to toe with the legendary Sergeant Equius Zahhak of the Alternia City Police Department."

"D--> If you don't surrender, that wish will be granted."

The man smiled at Equius and struck a fighting pose, "Well then, I don't surrender."

Equius strode towards the man, **"D--> Sir, you stand no chance against me. My STRENGTH will overwhelm you. I-"**

The breath was knocked from Sergeant Zahhak. The man had hit him just below the sternum.

"Troll physiology is remarkably similar to a human's. It's why the two can interbreed so easily. It also means they share the same pressure points"

Equius took a couple of steps back. He recomposed himself, but had to move back yet again as the man continued to throw punches and kicks at him.

Equius then tried to swing at the man only to be thrown across the helipad, he nearly skidded off, but caught himself on the edge.

"This is pathetic. I thought you were the strong-armed mutant of the APD?" The man walked to Equius, limbering up his neck and shoulders as he approached.

"D--> I am not a mutant." Equius got to his feet.

"Of course you are, all of you so-called high-bloods are. Nothing but a bunch of inbred backwards parasites" The man kicked out at the Sergeant's legs.

"D--> I am a proud member of the Alternia City Police Department!" Equius blocked the kick, but the terrorist jumped back before the troll could grab his leg.

The man laughed, "Don't get me started on them. That bunch are nothing more than degenerates...", he dodged Equius' fist.

"...low-life scum..." He swept out his leg and knocked Equius down onto his back.

"...and are completely worthless at protecting the idiots of this city."

The terrorist leapt into the air, aiming for the troll's neck. Equius caught his foot and stood up.

"D--> We are the proud protectors of this city," He lifted the man by his foot, the terrorist yelped when his head bounced off the helipad.

"D--> And you are under arrest."

As he said these words, Equius stumbled as the explosives in the building went off. The building shuddered and twisted as its support structure disappeared.

Equius dropped the man and the two slid as the helipad tilted with the rooftop.

"Well I guess this is good bye Sergeant. Thank you for satisfying my wish."

The man let himself fall into the growing dust cloud below. He vanished with a laugh.

Equius clung to a pipe as the building shuddered. His sweaty grip slipped and he fell.

Bits of the shattered building streaked past him, Equius watched as the the top of the building receded and thought that this was the end for him.

But then something caught him.

"Not going to let you go like that."

"D--> You're alive."

"In pain, but alive. Guess they're all dead."

They watched the collapsing building as Egbertman flew towards the police barricade.

"D--> It appears that way."

They landed and met with Aradia and Sollux.

"We managed t0 rescue m0st 0f the h0stages."

"Lookth liike the oneth we miithhed we already dead though. Apparently the hohtage takerth wanted thome ecthampleth of what would happen iif people rethithted."

"D--> Those monsters. At least they're all dead."

"That's true. But n0w the questi0n is, wh0 were they?"

"D--> Hopefully we'll find out."

Equius turned towards Egbertman and noticed the bleeding wounds in his chest.

"D--> You need medical assistance."

"No, I'm good. What I need to do now, is to find my hammer."

"D--> I kicked it at the helicopter and it became entangled in its blades."

They turned towards the growing dust cloud.

"And it's all buried underneath that. Great"

Egbertman flew off and disappeared into the night sky.

"Well thhiit, lookth liike iit'th goiing to be a fuckiing long niight diiggiing through all that thhiit."

Terezi walked up to Equius and Aradia, grinning at them, "But you two lucky souls g3t th3 r3st of th3 n1ght off. Ord3rs from th3 Comm1sh."

Equius looked at Officer Aradia Megido, put on a small smile and lifted his eyebrows, "D--> Would you like to spend this Four Saints Evening with me?" She reached out and slapped him down to the ground with a powerful blow. "NO," and then she flew off. Equius got up rubbing his face while Officers Captor and Pyrope laughed at him.

He blushed, laughed with them a bit and found his way to a waiting squad car. He had a long evening.

It was great that it was all over now.

Deep underneath the city, John Egbert winced in pain as Kanaya Maryam dug into his chest to pull out the bullets that didn't go cleanly through him.

"You Are Most Fortunate That Nothing Vulnerable Was Damaged."

"I'm just lucky."

"And that's something you shouldn't rely on you stupid idiot."

John tried to smile through the pain as Rose walked up to him in a fury.

"Uh, hey- AUGH GOD THAT HURT!"

He screamed as Kanaya pulled out the last bullet and placed it in a tray next to her. She then started to stitch the wounds closed, John winced in pain. Rose covered her mouth and turned away so her two loves wouldn't see her tears.

"So what happened in the Nakdoofenpap Tower, John?"

"It *urk!* was a group of well-trained and very well equipped men *ouch!*"

He gripped the sides of the bed as Kanaya beautifully stitched his wounds closed.

"They *ooh!* sealed the Tower and *erk!* melted their way into a vault on the executive suites."

"A vault?"

"*Oh god!* Yeah, a vault. I guess they were *fuck!* after money or jewels."

Rose turned around and took John's hand, Kanaya eyed this and went back to work, a little less painlessly this time.

"Did they say anything to you?"

"*Aargh!* No, but Officer Aradia said that I might know who they were. *Dammit Kanaya!* She and Equius seemed convinced they were special forces of some sort."

Rose became concerned and looked directly into John's eyes.

"What did they base this thought off of?"

John clenched his jaw as Kanaya finished up. He sighed when she started to bandage the stitched area.

"They were using these strange guns that wouldn't let anyone else use them, the robot cop had a hard time listening in on their radio conversations and the tactics the men used wasn't something either of us have seen amongst anyone else in the city."

Rose put her hands to her lips and looked at the ceiling worriedly, John and Kanaya's eyebrows raised in concern.

"Contact Jade, I believe we're going to have troubles in the near future."

Rose leaned forward and kiss John, then walked around the bed and embraced

Kanaya, kissing her as well.

"Now if you two will excuse me. I have to consult some resources to find out what's going on."

John and Kanaya watched her walk off. He looked at Kanaya and smiled.

"We've got a beautiful woman."

Kanaya sniffed, "Indeed."

"You too?"

John leaned back in his bed and laughed to himself, but stopped when his chest ached. Kanaya just arched an eyebrow at him and wondered what he was going on about now.

"Ha ha hee hee hoo hoo" by Aslandus

You are Doc Scratch. Of course you are, who else would you be? You know everything that is happening, everything that ever has happened, and everything that ever will happen. Which is very convenient considering your lack of any other useful skills. You have no face, and by extension no eyes, ears or mouth. It's a wonder anyone can hear you at all.

SKRSAHS: Draw deudly firearm

You reach to your holster and draw a crudely draw magnum. You are of course joking, the gun is currently in possession of Her Honorable Tyranny, and it won't be leaving her possession anytime soon.

SC♣@SEf: Tell us what happens next

Next Lord English will burst into the room, shout something stupid, and either you or the handmaiden will have to deal with it. This should not be surprising to anyone. Crowbar would be on that list, but he is of course still in jail. He thought you were going to send someone to send him. It's quite humorous. Ha ha. Hee hee. Hoo hoo.

LE: Burst into the room and say something silly

You easily kick the door off it's hinges.

GATHER ROUND! I HAVE FOUND SOMETHING WONDERFUL!

You hold up your prize, a ratty puppet in a sports jersey. It is a beautiful piece of cloth which will bring much suffering to your enemies, you can just tell.

\$KRADF: Respond

Nonsense! He must accompany us on the next mission!

Handmaiden: wash the puppet while LE is distracted

You would, but he's not distracted enough not to notice you grabbing something out of his hand, however, if you move two inches to the left... Got an angle... You cast a spell to clean the dirt off the puppet, a spell you avoid using on living targets due to... safety reasons. The puppet is clean and you can leave until you're undoubtedly needed in 28 seconds.

LE: bring puppet to life

That's not within your power. Wait, who are you kidding? You're lord English, of course it is! You force energy into the puppet, until it stands of it's own volition... and does absolutely nothing...

This is unsatisfactory! Scratch! Make it dance!

SKRASRJ: Make it dance

You connect to the puppet's mind and make it flail about while English laughs with childish glee. You can of course do this because the puppet is you, due to time shenanigans which surely everyone already knows, so you won't bore us with the details. Right now the puppet simply has no mind, but it'll drive Strider catatonic when he sees it. Let's try something else.

Lil Cal: Laugh

HAA HAA HEE HEE HOO HOO.

"Apple Juice" by Aslandus

Dave Strider was wearing his Crowbro gear, naturally he was about to head out on patrol, Dave didn't wear his superhero gear around the S.E.E.R. base like John did. Granted, body armor and a beaked helmet were a bit less comfortable than hooded pajamas, but John still looked ridiculous with his glasses and blue hoody. Dave went over to the refrigerator to grab some-

Maggie! where did you put the AJ?

Come in here, we need to talk!

Dave walked into the lounge area, where Maggie, John and Rose, all in their hero Regalia sat on the couch, probably awaiting their turn to head out on patrol. Strange, Rose usually sat around staring into her crystal ball to see if she could track down artifacts all day, and she didn't normally don her superhero persona. Dave sat down in the chair to the side of the table.

So what do we need to talk about? Is it something we should discuss alone?

Dave, we think you may have a problem.

What?

You've drunk two bottles of apple juice in the past week

Yeah, but the bottle are one serving, they're like, a single pint each

Oh dear, he doesn't even realize...

Rose speaking up unsettled Dave a little, though he wouldn't let it show so easily. Maggie placed an empty milk jug on the table, with a label from a bottle of apple juice stuck on the front.

Is this what you call one serving, Dave?

what the hell

dave, we're here because we care

Dave's composure was still unfaltering, but starting to give a little to his friends' pushing. Jade drifted in wearing her space lass outfit, back from patrol.

Guys! you started without me?

Dammit, it'll never work now!

you guys mind telling me what's going on

Ms. Magpie here said she could break through your tough guy facade.

I told her that nobody could break through the crust of Dave Strider, she bet she could get you to crack

Wha- bet? what did you bet

The last bottle of apple juice

She tossed John the bottle, he passed it to Dave.

You like this stuff more than me, Dave

Eh, thanks.

Dave, it's your turn to patrol

Crowbro headed out into the town with his juice in tow. He gave a small chuckle as he looked out over the streets and drank his juice.

"The Disaster" by Wigmund

Fifteen years have passed since that horrible day when what is widely known as 'The Disaster' occurred. That day when the Green Sun appeared above Hiveburg, transforming the area into the Lost District and would herald the awakening of the Skaian artifacts that were buried deep underneath the city. There wasn't a single person who lived in Alternia City at the time who wasn't affected by the incident or its aftermath that continues to afflict the city even now.

summary of 413th Artifact Recovery Operations Group (Nightwatch), Incident Report SCP-0001

At 4:13pm local time, June 12th, 199X, Incident SCP-0001 "The Green Sun Event" occurred in the East Coast metropolitan area "Alternia City". This event is believed to be the first known activation of the Skaian artifacts that are occasionally found world-wide, but are especially prevalent in the underground catacombs below Alternia City. It is theorized that this incident was the catalyst for the activation of all known further incidents of Skaian technology.

At the time detailed above, a suspicious glowing object rose from the ground in the northern-central portion of Alternia City's Hiveburg residential district. The object rose to an unknown height above the city and remained in that position for 10 minutes, 25 seconds before exploding in a massive ball of green flame that completely leveled the Hiveburg district, causing many areas to sink into the ocean.

Damage was also reported across the city, fires were triggered in every single district. The skyscrapers and large towers of the Glass City district reported the shattering of every window in the area, showering glass and debris into the streets below killing XXX people. The old city hall in the City Central district was so badly damaged by the incident that it had to be demolished. Eventually a massive tower was built at the same location.

Within the area formerly known as Hiveburg, an estimated XXXXXXXX people were killed with XXXXX believed to be missing and displaced by the Green Sun Event. An estimated 90% of the survivors leaving the area were reported to be children according to emergency responders and other rescue services that flooded the area in the aftermath of the blast. This lead to a glut of children entering the city's orphanages and homeless shelters. Most of these children are now believed to form the majority of the city's criminal element, providing a vast and cheap pool of recruits for the various criminal organizations that expanded operations in the city after the Green Sun Incident.

In the months following the Green Sun Incident, an additional event known as 'The Tumor' spread among the lusus [NOTE: Bio-engineered animals used by Trolls as guardians and protectors for their young] population of Alternia City and then to the lusci population worldwide.

On orders from the President, no attempts were made to contain or create a vaccine

for this plague as it was believed that with the deaths of the lusci, any power the remnants of the Troll Empire had at the time would be severely and irrevocably weakened.

This plague manifested itself as a series of green, luminescent lesions upon the bodies of lusci of all types. Fatality rate for the disease was 100%, an estimated 99.9% of known lusci contracted the plague. No new lusci have been known to be created since this incident, it is believed by intelligence sources that the Bio-Vats used to create these beings were compromised by the plague.

After this incident, 413th AROG - designation Nightwatch, was formed and sent to Alternia City to search for, recover and if need be destroy any and all Skaian technology. Unit was assigned to a small military base on the outskirts of the city, now designated "Fort Skaian" with orders to rapidly expand the base and use it as a center of operations. Additionally orders to build a research & development division to be based at Fort Skaian for the study of Skaian technology were issued.

Nightwatch is authorized to use any and all means to complete their tasks, but are ordered to remain unknown to city authorities and the public at large.

This report is classified "Top Secret", any known leaks of this information are authorized to be contained using any means possible against all suspected of viewing or possessing knowledge of this report.

10-year old Karkat Vantas and 11-year old Terezi Pyrope

The young girl enjoyed tormenting the boy she claimed was her 'boyfriend'. She liked how he would turn a wonderful cherry-red color everytime she did it. It was such an odd color for trolls to turn, but she loved red. Always had, always will.

They were standing on the front steps of her family's home in the south side of Hiveburg. The boy was staying there temporarily after running away from his own family, escaping the near-constant violence and torment that inhabited that place.

"Com3 on K4rk4t, why don't you w4nt to b3 my boyfr13nd?"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE CRAZY AND CREEPY! AND THE ONLY REASON YOU WANT ME IS BECAUSE OF MY FREAKISH BLOOD!"

"Your blood 1sn't fr34k1sh, 1t's wond3rful. 1t's l1k3 th3 stuff hum4ns 4nd hybr1ds h4v3."

"THAT'S WHY IT'S FREAKISH! I'M NOT A HYBRID! I'M PURE TROLL!"

"1 don't c4r3 4bout th4t my l1ttl3 str4wb3rry! H3H3H3H3"

"THEN JUST STOP TORMENTING ME!"

"Only 4ft3r you k1ss your g1rlfr13nd. Now puck3r up!"

Unfortunately for Terezi, Karkat was distracted by the sudden appearance of his shadow at an odd angle. Terezi looked at his stark shadow and then in the direction of the light source.

Right when the Green Sun erupted.

The two were knocked down by the blast. They covered themselves as the buildings around them shook and collapsed in the seismic event that followed the explosion.

Miraculously, the two weren't injured by the collapsing buildings. But the Pyrope family wasn't so fortunate, and they would later find out that the same was true for the Vantas family.

Karkat picked himself up and surveyed the destruction around him, red tears streamed down his frightened, dust-covered face.

"TEREZI! TEREZI!"

"K4rk4t, why 1s 1t d4rk!? Why c4n't 1 s33 4nyth1ng?!"

Karkat rolled over his friend who was clutching at her eyes and screaming in pain. He managed to pry her hands away, only to jump back in horror at what he saw.

"Your...your eyes..."

"Wh4t? Wh4t's wrong? Why c4n't 1 s33?"

"They're...they're gone Terezi...you're blind."

The girl started to cry in agony, Karkat helped her to her feet and the two eventually were rescued at the edge of the district. They were split up by rescue services as Karkat was relatively uninjured and Terezi needed immediate medical attention, the two lost contact with each other for almost 10 years.

11-year old Sollux Captor

The mustard-eyed troll with the four horns common to his relative sat on the roof of the family's house in the Settlements. He would climb up here to escape torment by his three older brothers, two older sisters and two younger sisters. It was the only place they wouldn't follow him up here. Mama never let them.

He sat on the roof, looking towards Alternia Bay which he could just barely make out through the massive warehouses that took up most of the horizon in that direction.

But then, something to the northeast caught his attention. He looked across the city, watching a tiny glowing dot rising in the air.

And then he watched it explode into a massive ball of green energy.

He was thrown from the roof as the shockwave blew past, landing on a rose bush in the gardens below. The world was shaking. He was terrified, he could hear horrified screams inside the house. He wanted to be inside to protect Mama, protect her because Dad had been taken away only four years before.

But he couldn't, he was hurting because the thorns had torn into his skin. His eyes hurt for some reason, he could see, but he would immediately close them because of the agony. He hurt as his mind burned and coursed with a strange new energy.

His oldest brother found him in the rose bush and took him inside where the family

treated his cuts and other wounds.

His mother eventually pried his hands away from his eyes and jumped back when she saw what had happened to him.

His beautiful mustard-colored eyes had changed.

29-year old Lillian Lalonde and 9-year old Rose Lalonde

Lillian was alerted by her young daughter and the violent shaking that something had happened in Alternia City.

Little Rose, sweet dear Rose, ran to her mother and cried into her dress-suit screaming about a scary light that suddenly appeared outside and all the shaking that happened afterwards.

Lillian picked the girl up and walked to a balcony that gave an excellent view of the city. Across town, smoke rose from fires that were beginning, the skyscrapers of Glass City no longer lived up to the district's name.

And when Lillian looked across the city towards, she dropped her martini and clasped her hand to her mouth as she watched the lingering globe of the Green Sun sink towards the ground below it. A mass of smoke rose from Hiveburg.

"What happened Mommy?

Why is there so much smoke?"

Rose tightened her grip around her mother's shoulders and started to weep as she looked across the city. Screams of terror and sirens could be heard everywhere.\

"Why are they screaming? Can you make it stop?

Please, Mommy, make it stop!"

Lillian patted her daughter's head and brought her back indoors. She shut the shades and put on the Squiddles video that her daughter loved so much. That was the only option as every single channel was overwhelmed with the emergency broadcast signal. She only caught a brief snippet of a droning voice asking residents of Alternia City to remain in their homes and not to go outside.

With her daughter distracted, Lillian walked down into her basement and opened a safe that was well concealed in the house's solid foundation. She reached in and retrieved a pair of oddly shaped, strangely colored needles. Needles that started to glow slightly as she reached for them.

She knew everything was going to be different now. She had so much to do now to prepare herself, to prepare her daughter, for what was to come.

She came back upstairs when she heard a knock at the front door. She opened it to find a man she hadn't seen in years, holding an unconscious and bloodied boy.

31-year old James Egbert, 29-year old Vivian Egbert and 10-year old John Egbert

The Egbert family always loved to fly. It was something they did every weekend. But this day was special, James and Vivian both had the day off and decided to treat their son to a flight. They picked him up from school early and within an hour, they were airborne. John loved to fly so much and it warmed his parents hearts to see him so happy.

Everything was perfect, the sky was clear, the sun was out in the northeast...Before James had time to try and sort out what was wrong with that, their small plane was knocked from the air by the shockwave.

He tried to regain control, but all the systems were fried. Vivian clutched John as he screamed in terror. James watched in horror as their plane plummeted towards the mountains to the west of town.

He tried to pull up, but nothing could stop them from smashing into the forested hillside. He awoke an hour later, blood caked on his forehead from where he banged it against the windshield. He recomposed himself and then went to check on his wife and son.

She was dead. A tree branch had entered through the windscreen and speared her to her seat. She must have died instantly, because her face was nothing but angelic concern for the boy in her arms. The branch just narrowly missed John, but he was knocked unconscious by the force of the crash.

Mr Egbert got out of the wrecked plane, marveling that he was able to walk. He pulled his son from his wife's life-saving grasp, promised her that he would not her sacrifice be in vain and started to walk towards town.

He could see the entire city from here. Smoke was everywhere. Sirens and alarms echoed through the massive valley the city occupied. He could see smoke rising from the hills all around him as well. His plane wasn't the only one knocked from the skies.

As he made his way through the woods, he saw a house. They could help.

He walked up to the door and knocked on it. Only to nearly drop his boy when he saw who opened the door.

24-year old Ambrose 'Bro' Strider and 9-year old Dave Strider

The two Striders watched the explosion of the Green Sun from their house in Old Town. They had noticed the rising glow and went to the roof of their apartment complex.

Their shades protected their eyes from the intense blast, but they were thrown from

the building top by the shockwave. Bro held on tightly to his ward and just as tightly to the building's awning when they went over the edge. He tossed up the frightened boy onto the roof before clambering up himself.

Bro looked down at Dave and gave him a thumbs up for not sobbing like anyone had a right to when shit like this happened. He halted and listened as the sounds of sirens, screams and alarms erupted all across the city. Smoke was rising everywhere.

The elder Strider took the younger's hand, they had work to do and people to save.

64-year old Hass 'The Flame' Harley and 10-year old Jade Harley

Hass watched the Green Sun erupt from the family estate near the Alternia Reservoir dam. His granddaughter clutched fearfully to his leg and the family dog as they watched the shock wave sweep across the city towards them.

Hass' eyes narrowed as he watched the shock wave hit the Glass City and he could watch the glowing sides of the skyscrapers there darkened as their windows exploded in showers of death for those who would be crowding the streets below.

He gripped the balcony's railing and stood strong when the shock wave reached the Harley estate. Jade and the dog were knocked back into the house, but The Flame remained.

After that passed, he picked up the crying frightened girl and walked down into the laboratories hidden beneath his house.

Down there he picked up a red phone and started making calls. Someone was going to be interested in this. Hass' crazy theories about those strange items that were buried under the city had come true.

8-year old Gamzee Makara

The young boy was woken up from his afternoon nap by the intense glow and the rumbling that broke the windows of his bedroom.

He bleated in terror until his grandfather, The Old Goat - the only person in the world who cared for the little boy, ran into the room and comforted the frightened troll. His parents were too drunk and too busy arguing with each other to even notice what had happened. Not that they would have cared about young Gamzee even if they had.

Gamzee clung to his Old Goat as the elderly troll walked to the windows and opened them to see what was going on. They were both shocked by what they saw outside. The family's estate in Alternia Heights gave them a perfect view of the devastation Hiveburg had just suffered. They both wept as they could see the sea sweeping into what had been land and businesses and homes.

The Old Goat patted his grandson's head and tried to comfort him the best he could. But that was hard with the devastation outside the home and the hatred that soaked into the rafter within.

13-year old Equius Zakhak

When the blast swept over the Zakhak estate in Alternia Heights, Equius was reading his younger brother - his weak, loving brother - a story about the glory days of the Troll Empire before they lost the Breeding Pits to a massive force of human empires, city-states and tribes that had allied with each other to fight off what was a greater threat over a thousand years before. The Troll Empire survived, but it was a fragmented shadow of what it had been before. The purists and traditionalists tried to keep it alive through stories about the glory days, back when they nearly controlled the known world.

When the blast hit the family's mansion, Equius shielded his brother with his own body, fearful that something may collapse upon the boy.

Afterwards, the two carefully went to the windows and looked out across the city. They were shocked at the devastation they saw. Equius grimaced in anger and frustration as his brother wept for the people who were inevitably in pain and trouble out there.

8-year old Vriska Serket

The young Mindfang was 'playing with her friends' in the Narrows when she saw the glow rise into the sky. She knew something was wrong, something bad was going to happen.

So she had them shield her and watch what would happen. They were all blinded by the blast and driven mad by Vriska's manipulations in the coming years.

She didn't care. She was more concerned when her lusus came down with The Tumors and she had to put the massive spider down. The incidences of homeless and children disappearing dropped off dramatically starting that day.

No one ever made the connection.

7-year old Feferi Peixes

Feferi and her family watched in horror from their sea-side estate in the Heights as Hiveburg disappeared below the massive green sun that appeared above it.

She looked up her parents and asked whether or not they could do something for those poor people. Someone had to save them. Someone had to do something.

She didn't understand it at the time when her parents wept and turned away the

horror across the waters. She thought they didn't care.

She didn't realize that they did. They cared deeply for everyone who lived in Alternia City, but they also knew that there were times when you couldn't do anything at all. You'd only get in the way.

Feferi turned back towards the ruined district and vowed that she would do anything in her power to protect not only the city, but anyone that needed help. Regardless of what kind of person they were, she would protect them.

Later, she would weep when her massive, sea-bound lusus was swept ashore next to their Peixes estate.

12-year old Eridan Ampora

Eridan watched the blast from his family's house in the Heights. When he asked his family to go help those below them however they could, he was beaten for caring about the low-bloods and non-trolls that populated the worst-hit areas.

It was not proper for the elite Amporas to care for those below them. It did not happen. Those below them were only fit for the blade or as servants. They all deserved to be culled, if only there were still Cullers, he was told.

That night, he decided to run away from the horrible beings that raised him. The only connection he would have to them from that time on would be his last name and his blood.

He would help with organized rescue sweeps of what would be called the Lost District. Eventually, an old man - a retired private investigator - took the runaway high-blood in. The old man taught Eridan everything he knew. And with that knowledge, Eridan would help the city by doing everything he could for the less fortunate.

10-year old Tavros Nitram

The boy smiled when he saw the devastation unleashed by the Green Sun. He wanted to wield that power. He deserved that power.

When his parents entered his room to check upon their poor boy, he wept that he was concerned about those poor people out there. He smiled when they embraced him and promised that they would protect not only him, but anyone who needed help out there in the city.

The boy smiled when he noticed the family's ancestral lance. Gleaming over the mantle in his room. It called out to him.

9-year old Kanaya Maryam

Young Kanaya traveled with her parents when they traveled deep into the ruins of Hiveburg looking for survivors. Trying to do what they could for those they found.

She assisted them whenever she could by hauling medical supplies and helping bandage those who were injured. Which seemed to be everyone they found. Everyone who wasn't dead.

Kanaya grimaced in fear and disgust when she bandaged the eyes of one troll who had been looking at the Green Sun when it exploded. The girl wept, crying in pain and fear, calling out for someone that was not there.

Kanaya wondered who this Karkat was. The girl's father? Her friend?

10-year old Aradia Megido

In the Settlements, Aradia sat in her bedroom watching the young neighbor boy climb up onto the roof of his house. She always liked watching him. When he was outside with his mother, when he ran around with his innumerable siblings, when he would notice the maroon-eyed girl across the street watching him and would look away bashfully.

She tried to talk to him, but they were both so flustered by each other that they couldn't get anything out and would just end up running back to their houses.

She watched the boy she wanted to talk to so much as he sat on the rooftop, staring off into space. She reeled back when there was a sudden flash of light. She returned to the window, holding on tightly when the shock wave swept over the Settlements.

She watched in terror as the boy was thrown from the roof and into the gardens below. She ran through her house and across the street and got the attention of the boy's family, telling them where he was.

Aradia watched in horror when the boy was brought inside and his mother opened his eyes. What happened to him? What was going on?

Then the pain hit her. Her head. She screamed and collapsed, clutching her head.

What was happening to her? Why was this happening?

4-year old Nepeta Leijon

The little girl sat in her family's front yard, playing in the mud. She loved mud. It let her make pies and build little critters for her and her lusus to hunt.

:33 < *The bwave wittle cub leaves the protection of the bestest huntress in the world and stalks the weak and tasty mudbeasts that infest her yard*

The lusus would keep the girl from harming herself, but it enjoyed watching her play and imitate it.

Today, the girl had brought out her favorite toy, a massive blue cat toy that she dragged most any where she went.

":?? < *The cub is confused by something she sees*"

The girl called out for her lusus to come check out what she found.

Something was digging its way out of the ground. The lusus pulled her back when a glowing sphere of light erupted from the dirt and slowly rose into the air.

This was bad, something was going to happen. The girl watched in awe as the light rose into the air, she gripped her doll and tried to jump for the light despite it being way too far out of reach for her.

The lusus ran up to the girl and gripped her in its mouth and began to run south. It almost made it out of Hiveburg when the glowing light exploded. The lusus and the girl were thrown across the canal that separated Hiveburg from The Narrows.

The lusus got up, limped over to the girl and found that she was fine, just curled up around her doll. Eyes clamped close in terror, lime green tears streaming down her face.

The lusus picked her up and walked into the ruined city, ignoring the horrible sores that were forming on its back.

Days later, the lusus would be dead, spreading 'The Tumor' into the city. The young girl would roam the alleyways, trying to find food, not understanding what was going on. Just as she was about to give up hope and die, someone found her.

Someone should would remain with despite everything that would happen over the next 15 years.

Midnight Crew: Spades Slick, Diamonds Droog, Hearts Boxcar and Clubs Deuce - ages unknown

The Crew was in the basement of the Paint Job entertaining those who were allowed to enter their club with their amazing jazz performances.

A performance that was cut short when the building shook and shuddered. The place emptied out quickly and the four Dersites made their way to the Paint Job's roof.

They looked towards the glowing green sphere that floated over Hiveburg and watched it dissipate and sink towards the ruined district below.

Diamonds Droog spoke up, nudging his leader.

"Wasn't Queen in Hiveburg picking up a shipment?"

"Why the fuck do you think I would care about that?"

Everyone backed up from Spades Slick as his claws dug into the bricks that lined the building's roof top. He was furious. Furious that something had happened without his knowledge. Furious that this would interfere with his plans to expand into Hiveburg.

"It's the bitch's own fault if she got killed, and if she didn't die - she better stay away if she lost the fucking shipment"

His three companions looked at each other, they liked Queen, she was nice to them. They kinda enjoyed the love-hate relationship she had with Spades.

"But right now I want to find out what just the fuck happened. It's bound to be big and I want to be the first to get my claws into that pie."

Doctor Maximillian Faustus Scratch, age unknown

The man knew what was about to happen. At 4:13pm, he walked out onto the balcony of his family's manor in Old Town and looked towards Hiveburg waiting for the inevitable to occur.

He shielded his eyes and smiled grimly when the Green Sun made its appearance.

It was time. It was time to organize the gang to prepare the way for the master's arrival.

Several days later, he waited patiently in his living room for a guest who would be arriving soon. He answered the door before she completed the first knock.

He smiled at the bloodied Dersite who had limped up onto his doorstep and begged for help.

unknown Consort - Salamander type

The starving salamander stumbled through the sewers and caves that were common underneath Alternia City. He was tired. The only reason he wasn't cold was due to the bedsheet he had found and wrapped himself with.

He had no idea where he was when he tumbled through a broken wall and into what looked a chamber of an ancient temple. His damaged mind barely took in the glyphs upon the walls that showed various consorts of all types dancing around a massive sphere.

He just noticed the closed lotus in the middle of the room. He knew it had to have food. He limped over to it and banged on the petals, trying to open it.

He was thrown back when the thing opened up and a glowing sphere rose from it.

He watched in terror as the sphere rose from the lotus, through a hole in the ceiling and up through the earth.

He felt the world shake violently when the Green Sun made its appearance far above him. And he knew he had found his purpose.

He was the Wizard, and this temple would be his secret. He would re-establish the cults of old.

It was time for the consorts to reclaim the lands the big folk stole from them. Time to seek vengeance for centuries of slavery and genocide.

The Secret Wizard would herald that vengeance. They would all behold his robes and weep.

"The Man in the Green Robe" by pandoraElf

The Green Sun Incident that occurred 15 years ago was a devastating event for many reasons. It affected the lives of many, and took away those of countless more. But very few know of exactly what happened immediately after the incident, at the epicenter of the explosion...

15 years ago...

The air was charged with energy, enough so that anyone who was in the vicinity could feel it. But if you had been in the vicinity, the first thing you would have noticed would have been the man standing in the exact center of the crater.

The man, a human to be precise, was garbed in a tattered robe that looked as though it had seen better days. His skin was bruised and battered, and his eyes were without pupils. If you had been there, you might have thought he was dead, were it not for the rise and fall of his chest and his twitching and quivering.

The man looked down at his hands, and then looked around. His eyes widened in shock, then in horror. "No..."

"No, this c-cant be. This isn't r-right. No, no...NO!!!!!"

The man ran, in a meaningless direction to any who looked on, and to the man himself. He ran towards the metropolis in the distance, and didn't stop running when he reached it. He raced throughout the alleyways, stumbling but never faltering. Only a sudden misstep and a fall brought him to his knees.

"Everything's...wrong..."

The man looked up to see a strange sight. It was strange, indeed, that this new witness wore a dapper suit that looked far too elegant for him to be in an alleyway. Stranger still was the fact that he was sitting on an ornamental chair and sipping a cup of tea nonchalantly. But perhaps the strangest thing of all was that the man had no face, instead a simple round white ball. However, none of this was in the slightest bit strange to either party, for both knew who the other was.

"You...YOU DID THIS!"

The man lunged at Scratch, whom effortlessly moved to the side in order to dodge the feeble attack. However, no sooner did Scratch evade then the man change course, and charged towards him. If he had more time to analyze the situation, he might have thought to wonder why Scratch, omniscient, all-powerful being simply stand there and wait for the man to reach him. But this man did not analyze even in his calmest of states, and so continued his attack, proceeding to grab Scratch.

And nothing happened.

The man's eyes widened.

"No...impossible..."

Scratch proceeded to toss the man roughly aside.

he remarked.

"NO!! STAY AWAY!!"

The man bolted as though he had seen a ghost. Scratch's white head moved slightly. If he had a face, or any features at all, it could be seen that he smiled.

The man ran, and ran, and ran...

Eventually, his lungs gave out, and he slowed to a stop and collapsed to the ground.

"No...it's all wrong"

The man, shivering, curled up into a ball.

And Andrew Hussie wept.

"A Reason to Fight" by Redikalus

A young troll named Equius Zahhak sat in nice looking but uncomfortable chair. His father stood off to the side looked away from him, a silent sign of disappointment and displeasure. His mother paced before him for a few seconds before stopping and addressing him.

Equius, what are we going to do about you.

His father remained silent. He always remained silent in these kinds of situations.

Another fight, and this time the other boy is in the hospital.

Equius began to sweat. He himself barely had a bruise on him.

D--> I did not mean to hurt him like that, just make him sorry for what he said about-

Before he finished, his mother slapped him.

I do not care about what the low-b100d said, violence is unbecoming of our noble b100-b100ds, even if it is against those lesser creatures.

She sighed, put her hands in her face, and then said with a sob,

Why couldn't you be more like your brother? Go to your room, you are not to leave until I call for you.

As his father lead his mother off, Equius slid out of the chair and solemnly obeyed his mother. His room was on the lowest floor of their house, and had been ever since his brother earned Equius' old room. After he marched downstairs and closed his door, he plopped down on his bed and did nothing. After half an hour of silence, he heard footsteps creep down the steps to his room. When they reached the bottom, his door slid open silently and his younger brother entered the room. As his brother closed his door just as silently as it was opened, Equius objected.

D--> You shouldn't be here, you will get in trouble as well.

I know, but I wanted to show you what I had made!

His brother crept over and placed his cupped hands on Equius' bed. He unclasped them to reveal a small horse. It was fully automatic and as it did a lap around his bed, Equius smiled.

See, I knew you'd like it!

Equius himself had some talent with building things like this but he was but a dabbler in comparison to his brother's genius. His brother had a genius truly befitting his noble blood, but was weak and Equius saw it as his duty to protect him. Equius loved his brother more than anyone else.

Equius stared down at his brand new officer's cap. He had worked for this for years. He had made the decision when the Makaras had been brutally murdered. They had come across the scene during one of their weekly walks and Equius tried to shield his brother from the sight as best he could but his brother caught glimpses. He wept all the way back to their house, Equius didn't shed a single tear; his brother had always been much more companionate than Equius. What struck Equius was that there was a police officer killed along side them, not strong enough to protect them. It was then that Equius had found purpose for his mutant STRENGTH. He could protect anyone, just as he protected his brother. He fought his parents for months over this, they even threatened to disown him; they felt serving the lesser populace like this was beneath someone of his noble blood.

He put on his cap and looked around at the other new officers. As he did, he began to sweat; he was getting nasty looks from just about everyone. His family was quite well known, especially for behavior towards others. It was natural for the low-bloods and

humans to envy his family's status, but he sweat under the malicious gazes of his peers non-the-less.
He would soon prove to them that his confidence and superiority was well placed.

Years later, Equius had been promoted to the rank of Sergeant. His brother was now a leading doctor in the field of cybernetic surgery, a position befitting his talent, his nobility, and most of all, his compassion.

Equius was finishing up some paperwork at a desk reserved for on-duty sergeants. It was his turn to do some desk work and though he enjoyed the opportunity to give out commands, something was bothering him now. Something made him uneasy. As he finished the current document he saw some officers rush out, as if they were on an important case.

That's odd, they were on his precinct and he hadn't heard anything about a major crime happening. He tried to call out to them, but they didn't hear him. His uneasiness grew. He walked over to the other sergeant, a brown-blooded troll.

D--> What was that about?

Uh... nothing important.

Equius watched as the sergeant began to sweat.

D--> I just want to know in case I have to do more paper work, those were men on my precinct.

Nothing, I can handle all the paperwork, you just go back to you station... please?

The sergeant was now sweating profusely, almost as much as Equius did on occasion. Equius could now tell something was being hidden from him. He reached over the table and grabbed the sergeant by his uniform and lifted him over the desk.

D--> You are hiding something form me. What is it!?

As he did this, his newly made partner, Aradia Megido, came in the room. One look at the situation and she used her powers to throw Equius against wall.

D--> What is the meaning of this!?

d0 n0t attack 0ther Officers zahhak

y0u were taken Off the case by the captain

D--> Why!?

After a brief pause as Aradia considered the situation, she gave him the answer he feared.

because it is ab0ut y0ur br0ther

The shock struck him like a train, but it didn't stop his instincts from taking over. He got up and turned to run towards the door. Aradia, predicting this made it to the door first and blocked his way. Equius charged towards the door.

D--> Out of my way!

When Aradia didn't move, Equius threw her aside with all of his might, slamming her through the nearby wall. Her robotic shell meant that she would survive, but Equius didn't care about that. He ran to the street and looked around. Where was his brother supposed to be last? Nitram! That's right, his brother was helping the young Nitram boy with his new pair of legs. Equius took off in that direction, listening for sirens with every pounding step he made.

As he barreled down the street, he heard sirens from the direction he was headed and quickened his pace. As he drew closer to the source he realized something; this wasn't just on his precinct, this was on his route, his protectorate, and he had been stuck on desk duty the whole day. He turned the next corner and saw the flashing blue and red lights. There were three cars there already and someone had put up the police line

tape. He ran over and when the other officers saw him they jumped out of the way. He wasn't supposed to be here but they were too afraid of him to get in his way. The scene that Equius came upon bathed him in horror. Blue blood was everywhere; the streets, the walkways, the walls, and with the blood, words had been spelt out. Words like Spy, Death, Snitch, Weak, Victim, Enemy, and countless others were spelt out in a macabre mess of blue gore. The body was disfigured to the point where the only thing that showed him that this was indeed his brother were the small mechanical trinkets running around in the pool of his blood. As he watched a small horse walked over and bumped into his ankle, falling over and spilling more blood on the payment before him. Equius' howl carried as far as the Narrows.

After demanding, Equius had been put back on the case, most likely because everyone, superior officers included, were terrified of the fit of rage he was in. His rage carried him through five nights and five days of investigation without rest. At dusk on the sixth night, with no leads, no evidence, no suspects, his partner forced him to stop. When he was walking out of station, Aradia came up and blocked the door.

D--> Out of my way Megido, that's an order.

n0. im a r0b0t s0 i can handle all this time with n0 sleep.

y0u cann0t.

D--> I can and I will! Out of my way!

Aradia placed her hand on his chest and gave him a hard shove. Equius stumbled back and toppled over onto another, unlucky officer.

the fact that i was able to push y0u 0ver s0 easily sh0ws that y0u are in n0 c0nditi0n t0 c0ntinue investigati0n.

D--> I'm fine!

Truth be told, he was absolutely exhausted, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. As he struggled to get up, Aradia walked over.

there is n0thing y0u can d0 anym0re.

D--> Yes there is!

Aradia offered a hand to Equius. After giving her a quick glare, he accepted it and let her pull him up.

im s0rry equius, i never knew y0u cared s0 much, but it is 0ver.

get s0me rest, that is an 0rder straight fr0m the captain.

Aradia turned around and left, leaving Equius standing in the middle of the room with every other cop in the place staring at him. He removed his hat, hung his head in shame, and slowly marched out of the station. No one would dare admit it later, but every cop in the room caught a glimpse of light blue tears streaming down his face.

It was a year later and Equius was sitting in his office at the station. He had his elbows on the table and his hands clasped together just below his nose. He dislike this room because someone of his rank should not have such a room, because others used his office as a storage place due to him never using, and because it reminded him that every time he was stuck here, it was less time for him to be out on the streets stopping crime. The only reason he was in her was because AR himself wished to speak with him. Equius knew why AR came, and it made him irritated. It was pointless, he would get the same answer every time.

The door swung open and AR walked in. He was carrying a manila folder in one arm.

"Sergeant Zahhak, our star officer, it seems I have some good news for you."

Equius said nothing as AR placed the folder on his desk and sat down in the chair

opposite of him and smiled. AR liked Equius for his dedication and prowess, though his anger problem could get in the way sometimes.

"You have been approved for promotion to Lieutenant rank!"

AR turned the folder to face Equius and flipped it open. Inside lay a gold bar, the lieutenants medal, and the necessary paperwork. Without hesitation, Equius pushed the bar away from him.

D--> With all due respect sir, I refuse.

AR growled, showing his growing irritation, he too had anger problems.

"Zahhak, this is the third time you've refused this promotion! What is it going to take for you to accept!?"

D--> As ine%cusable my family would find it, I did not choose to serve so I could lead.

D--> I chose to serve so I could protect, so I could fight.

D--> Accepting this promotion would take some of that away from me, so I will refuse every time.

AR sighed and got up from the chair he was in and began to leave the room.

"Zahhak, I'm disappointed."

D--> I am not, I am e%actly where I want to be.

"Then report to Lieutenant Gandra, he has a case for you."

D--> Yes sir.

AR left the room. Without hesitation, Equius put his cap on and followed the commissioner out of his room.

"The Boy's Smile" by Wigmund

They all said he was a happy child despite his unfortunate circumstances. So dreadful and so embarrassing for such a prestigious family. But his parents still loved him anyways and made sure he was happy. They gave him the greatest gifts their vast wealth could buy. He should have been a happy child.

But Tavros Nitram was truly anything but. Nobody ever saw him as anything otherwise, he made sure of that. But in reality, the crippled boy with the oversized horns held nothing but hatred for those who brought him into the world. He hated those who sought to placate him because of his disabilities.

They saw nothing but those limp legs.

That was all they saw.

They didn't see the intelligent mind. The ruthless cunning. The absolute lack of morals.

They didn't see what would make him so well known later in life.

And for that, they had what was coming to them.

It was a moment of weakness for the boy. He let his rage take him. He let them see Rufio.

He used the family's ancestral lance. So bloodstained from use generations past. It gained a new coating that night.

Tavros looked up from what he had done and smiled. His whole family. His rage relished it until another spoke up.

Cunning said, "Look at what you have done boy. There is no way you can deny this. They will all find out."

But rage only roared back, "WHO CARES?! LOOK AT WHAT I HAVE CREATED! ISN'T IT THE GREATEST MASTERPIECE?!"

To which cunning replied, "We can relish what we have done, but we must make sure no one tracks this deed back to us."

It curled in upon itself in delight, "We must find someone else to take the fall. Someone that no one would question, something that no one would doubt capable of this."

As the boy looked at the rainbow of blood upon his hands, the family's servant entered the room and sealed the consort's doom. It had been drawn not by the screams of the boy's parents, but the voices in which the boy spoke to himself.

Cunning spoke, "The consorts...they are already looked down upon. It would not take much to tilt the blame upon this one," Rage smiled, the boy raised his hands and the consort obeyed.

When the police came upon the scene, they found the despicable consort covered in the blood of its victims. Lance in grubby hands. There was no doubt what had happened. The police said it was a miracle that they happened upon the scene when they did. For if they did not, the boy surely would have bleed to death.

The city held its breath as the boy entered surgery and survived. The doctors had tried their best, but even with the most advanced cybernetic prosthesis and implants, the boy's existing disabilities and this new spinal injuries assured that he would never walk again. Just as the boy wanted all to think.

The boy smiled in joy as the city's praise and concern showered upon him. They cried with him as he so cunningly faked his remorse at his parents funeral. They followed closely the court travails as the boy secured stewardship of his family's vast estates and wealth from what were obviously greedy relatives.

The city followed his heed when he called for the shunning of the consorts that had inflicted such pain upon his kindred.

And the boy smiled.

He smiled because he had secured all that he needed for any future plans.

He had the wealth.

He finally had working legs.

He had a network of eyes that he could see through. Eyes that no one would suspect because they were mere gutter trash.

And most of all he had the city's trust.

With that trust, no one would dare connect sweet crippled Tavros Nitram to the sociopathic crime lord Mr Pupa.

And with that, the boy smiled.

"The Accident" by Aslandus

You are a young troll with large horns and mechanical legs standing in a room. There is a wheelchair, a door, a large chest, and a lance mounted on the wall.

Enter Name

You are now Tinman Hornhead, mighty warrior and-

Troll: Protest and demand new name

You pitch a fit and are given the new, less awesome sounding name "Mr. Pupa"

Fly, Pupa, Fly!

That sounds incredibly silly, while you could probably jump quite high with these mechanical legs, perhaps even clearing buildings with a little bit of parkour prowess, it's by no means flight. Also, you're indoors, and these giant horns seem like they would get caught on things anyway, even without adding flight into the mix

Pupa: get arms from chest

There is no armament in this chest, the only weapon in the room is the lance on the wall

Pupa: Wield the lance, be the rider

You don't want to sit down, you like walking around and that lance is certainly not meant for a person on their feet. However, you don't recognize where you are, and a weapon might be necessary. The first chance you get, you're getting yourself a handheld weapon appropriate for a walking warrior such as yourself. Wielding this lance actually makes you look kind of noble, you need to complete this ensemble, it is very pressing!

Pupa: Don top hat and monocle

You don't have a monocle, but you find a top hat in the chest. You put on the hat, and look like some kind of dashing noble. Surely with a monocle you would be the epitome of nobility.

Pupa: Exit the room

You walk out the door and find a set of stairs.

Pupa: slide down the banister

You glide down the handrail like an excitable child. Nobody says nobles aren't allowed to have fun. When you reach the bottom you see a grand passageway into a room, there are voices through there.

Pupa: Jump to conclusions

Clearly whoever is through there has either kidnapped you and trapped you in this mansion... wait, that doesn't make sense, the door wasn't even locked. Clearly they have broken into your home and are planning to steal all your stuff!

Pupa: Do something and poorly planned out

You dive into the room and immediately impale two of the brown-blooded trolls. A troll a little older than you and an adult female troll. There is also an adult male troll, a female troll slightly younger than you and another male troll slightly older than you, who looks almost identical to the first male troll you killed. These thieves cannot escape you now!

Pupa: Stop murdering everyone

Too late, you've already killed them all. An old troll walks into the room

What the h*ll Tavros?

You hurl your lance through his chest before the burglar has a chance to run away. Ugh, suddenly your head is aching, and your legs feel sluggish. You should probably... lay... down...

You collapse onto the ground, your head smacks into the ground.

You are now Tavros Nitram. You are lying face down in some kind of warm, viscous fluid. You don't remember how you ended up here, but your metal legs are offline, so the ten minute testing battery must have run out. You never bothered to change it, since you never planned to use the legs to begin with. Even so, it would take a few days for the bioelectric battery to charge up...

You push yourself over, and see brown blood coating the walls, your family slaughtered. Your father, mother, twin brothers and sister, even your grandfather Rufioh, all dead with wounds through the chest. The family lance stuck in your grandfather. You think you're going to be sick. You call the police to report the murders, and then just sit in the same spot until they arrive...

"Cat Fight" by Wigmund

(The one with the pudding)

Situated in Dockside, The Cod Place was a popular bar and club of ill repute for the city's vast underworld. Many criminals stopped there to celebrate successful heists, bemoan run-ins with Officer [Sh4ll-Not-B3-N4m3d-4loud](#) or to perform much needed transactions that supplied fully two-thirds of the city's true economy.

The Karkat Gang liked the place because they were able to use it as a warm place to sleep when they were younger and the owner, Mr Bard, gave them drinks back then without asking for identification, or that they need him to do that anymore, except for Nepeta, she didn't drink alcohol. Bad things happened when Nepeta drank alcohol.

Really bad things.

Tonight, the Gang was at the Cod celebrating a successful heist that was not related to Mr Pupa meaning they got to keep all of the proceeds. Food and supplies for weeks, and some extra to blow having fun.

"Here's to the heist guys. We couldn't have done it without each other."
Gamzee and Karkat raised their beers in a toast, Nepeta raised up a chocolate milkshake. They clicked their mugs together and drank down. God that was refreshing.

Gamzee put down his empty mug and motioned to Flothers that he needed a refill.
"So My FuCkInG pAl, WhAt'S nExT?"

"To be honest man, I'm not going to worry about that. We're set for the foreseeable future with the proceeds from this and the last thing we pulled for Pupa."

":?? < So we're going to taking it 33sy and have fun?"

"I guess so."

":33 < I want to go to the Zoo! Can we go to the Zoo?"

Nepeta bounced around her seat happily at the thought.

"Sure, why not. I've never been there for legitimate reasons. You fine with the zoo Gamzee?"

Gamzee paused in the middle of his second beer and stared off into space. It always took questions some time to push their way through the sopor-induced haze of his mind. But when they did, he generally responded to what you actually asked him.

"Oh FuCk YeAh! I hAvEn'T bEeN tO tHe ZoO sInCe I wAs...Oh...Oh My..."

Oh shit, flashback. Karkat quickly snapped his fingers in front of the clown's face, bringing him back to the current reality.

"YeAh MoThErFuCkInG zOo."

The three occupied themselves with their drinks and talking about what they wanted to do with their free time. They rarely had moments like this, but they had learned long ago to pack them with whatever they could get away with.

You never knew when you'd have time like that again.

Or when those times would be rudely interrupted.

Karkat, Gamzee and Nepeta were too busy chatting with each other and laughing to notice a woman making her way towards them.

"Seriously Nepeta, you want to see the lemurs more than the big cats?"

"X33 < They're just soooo cute! If I had known about them befur I would be a lemur and not a kitty!"

"Well you know about them now."

"B|| < You efur hear of a lemur-burglar?"

":PP < Besides, there's no lemurs in the city for me to burgle besides those at the zoo!"

Karkat looked at his catgirl friend woozily. She was his catgirl friend, not his cat girlfriend, that would be sick if she was a cat and his girlfriend, though she was cute...

Karkat was going to agree with Nepeta's suddenly practical logic but he was stopped by a pair of arms wrapping themselves around his shoulders. He glanced out of the corner of his eyes to see lips he swore he had seen before.

"Are you guys having another party?"

Karkat's eyes widened as the alcohol haze was burned away by the sudden need to be acutely aware of what was going on RIGHT NOW.

"What? What are you doing here?"

Nepeta was confused, she looked back and forth between Karkat and the new woman.

"I'm just out having fun. I can have fun can't I?"

"Well yeah, it's just that I didn't think your kind visited this place."

"My kind? Just because I'm the Magpie doesn't mean I can't visit seedy dives looking for lovely shiny things."

Nepeta's beaming smile that usually occupied her face slowly started to fade as something sank in.

"Oh...okay. But Maggie, I was planning on spending the night with my friends."

Maggie, obviously drunk, took in the others at the table.

"Oh it's you two. Hi clown and kitty."

She waved at them before turning her attention back to Karkat. Nepeta motioned for Daunchy to come over.

"Did you remember the important thing Karkat?"

Karkat's eyebrows raised in confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"Karkat! It was important that you remembered it!"

"What the fuck are you talking about."

Daunchy arrived at the table and started to converse with Nepeta.

"I'm disappointed that you didn't remember it. How could you forget this?"

To Karkat's horror, Maggie turned around and raised her skirt exposing her ass to all in the room. There was a little bird on her underwear. Gamzee's mind shut down and his vision glazed over. Nepeta's eyes flared and she placed her order.

"Oh god, can't you leave me alone? I..."

"What? You didn't enjoy our rooftop escapades?"

"No! I mean...I..."

"You were definitely enjoying it that night."

Maggie purred as she rubbed his horns. Karkat tried to control himself. Damn those sensitive things. Nepeta's smile was completely gone and her eyes were focused on Maggie.

Karkat wondered what her problem was.

"Come on Karkat, let's leave these two and go somewhere quieter."

Karkat babbled nervously, trying to get the drunken woman away from him. Nepeta's drink arrived and she downed it in one swig.

Karkat's mind screamed an all-stations alert and his head whipped towards the now empty glass sitting in front of Nepeta.

"WHAT WAS THAT?"

Nepeta stood up, focused on Maggie who was still messing with Karkat's horns.

">:[[< A Swamp Wizard."

There were very few things that had an express passage through Gamzee's brain haze.

News that Nepeta had just down one of the most powerful alcoholic drinks in the city in one gulp was one of them.

In fact, that news had its own ticker tape period because shit was about to get real.

Karkat was frozen in terror, a condition that worsened when Nepeta punched Maggie hard enough to send her back a good ten feet.

">:[[< Stay away from him you BITCH! KARKITTY'S MINE!"

She then threw herself onto the table and pounced at the prone woman, who, despite being drunk as hell, had incredible reflexes.

The two started to fight, throwing each other around and tearing at each others hair and clothing.

Karkat was looking straight ahead at his other companion in terror.

"Gamzee"

"YeAh?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

"YoU gOt TwO fUcKiNg BaBeS flgHtInG oVeR yOu My MoThErFuCkInG mIrAcUlOuS fRiEnD."

"Me? They're fighting over me?"

Behind them, the two women knocked over several tables, sending other patrons flying. It was a flurry of hair, brightly colored clothing and animal-themed caps.

"WhAt? YoU dIdN'T cAtCh ThOsE fUcKiNg ViBeS?"

Karkat leaned forward, genuinely curious about what Gamzee was trying to say.

"What vibes? What are you talking about?"

Gamzee leaned forward as well, genuinely confused why his friend was. It was obvious what was going on...wasn't it?

"DoN't FuCkInG tELl mE tHaT yOu HaVeN't NoTiCeD tHe HoT bItChEs TriPpInG OvEr ThEmSeLvEs To GeT aT yOuR hOrNs?"

"What girls are you talking about? Sure, I've talked to plenty of women."

Gamzee's eyebrows raised in shock at what he was hearing.

"But they weren't interested in me - not like that."

"WhOa, I tHoUgHt I wAs FuCkInG oBlIvIoUs."

"What?"

There were loud crashes around them as the fight tumbled around the Cod Place.

Daunchy screamed in terror as the combatants used him as a weapon temporarily.

"YoU MeAn YoU dIdN'T rEaLiZe ThOsE wOmEn WaNtEd YoU?"

"Like who?"

"LiKe ThAt FuCkInG sCiEnCe BiTcH aT tHe FoRt."

"You mean Jade?"

"YoU eVeR tAkE uP hEr OffeR tO mEeT uP sOmEwHeRe Off bAsE?"

Gamzee's eyebrows and ears waggled naughtily.

"No...I just thought she was being nice."

"WhAt AbOuT tHaT mAgGiE nEpEtA's FiGhTiNg RiGhT nOw OvEr YoU?

HeLl, LeT's NoT fOrGeT nEpEtA! ShE's WaNtEd YoU sInCe BeFoRe I mEeT yOu TwO fUcKeRs."

"Maggie's just odd and Nepeta..."

Karkat's eyebrows furrowed in yet more confusion.

"Nepeta likes me? I mean, likes me likes me?"

Gamzee gave his obviously clueless friend a deadpan stare.

The sounds of destruction had subsided by now as the largest men in the bar had tackled the two women and pried them apart. Mr Bard walked up between them and started talking to them both. Karkat was too busy with his indepth conversation with Gamzee to watch what was going on. Otherwise he would have seen that the Cod Place's owner had set up something between the women.

They followed him into the back and there was suddenly commotion on the stage that dominated the bar.

"You can't be serious about that. Nepeta doesn't like me that way."

"WhY tHe FuCk Do YoU tHiNk ShE kEePs ThAt ShIpPiNg WaLl?"

"I thought was just into shipping everyone she ever met."

"ShE dId It To GeT yOuR fUcKiNg AtTeNtIoN!"

"Then why did she constantly mention it when we ran into Jade and Maggie for the first time?"

"BeCaUsE sHe WaS jEaLoUs AnD wAnTeD tO eMbArRaSs YoU!

DoN't TeLl Me YoU'rE rEaLIY tHiS tHiCk MaN!"

"I'm not thick!"

"I nOtIcEd BeFoRe YoU dId!"

Karkat stopped and thought about that for awhile.

Meanwhile, Flothers and a badly battered Daunchy pulled a large plastic tub onto the stage and then started to fill it with something.

"Really? You've noticed this all the time and never told me?"

"FuCkInG hELL! I flgUrEd ThAt If I wAs NoTiCiNg ThIs MirAcUlOuS sHiT gOiNg On, YoU mUsT hAvE."

"I thought all those women were just being nice to me.

I mean, I'm not that great of a person. Why'd they like someone like me?"

Gamzee was taken aback by this. His best friend doubting himself?

On the stage, the two women came out in their underwear and animal caps. Well, Maggie came out in her underwear, Nepeta had to borrow some garments from the dressing area for the women that worked at the Cod Place. Mr Bard was on stage yelling something to the very excited audience.

Pity Karkat was completely oblivious to all this as his mind retreated within itself. He was obviously troubled by these revelations, but Gamzee found himself distracted by what was going on now elsewhere.

"Gamzee...Gamzee? What's going on?"

Karkat's gaze followed his friend's and he froze yet again. He felt the blush starting at his toes, making its way up his body, as he watched what was going on.

Nepeta and Maggie had climbed into the pool and started to fight each other yet again.

Pudding was everywhere.

People were cheering.

Gamzee was uttering something about miracles.

Karkat's mind broke.

But he couldn't stop watching.

After what felt like an eternity, Nepeta stood victorious over the face-down Maggie. She pumped her fists into the air and stalked off the stage towards her old table.

When she got there, Karkat stared up at her stupidly. His mouth was hanging open and he just muttered something stupidly as she looked down at him. He continued babbling as she grabbed his shirt and pulled him up off his feet to kiss him passionately. The blush spilled over his neckline and raced up to his horns in record time.

Nepeta raised one of his hands into the air, leaving him dangling by one arm. Unable to comprehend what was going on.

">:33 < KARKITTY IS MINE! THIS ONE IS MINE BITCHES!"

Back on the stage, two similar looking fellows retrieved the unconscious girl from the pool. Her father was going to have a long talk with her.

Karkat finally started to approach reality again and he looked up at the still barely dressed Nepeta.

"Zoo good?"

"My Despised" by Wigmund

The two sat across from each other at one of the massive tables that made up the Nitram Manor dining hall. He sat there in his finest tuxedo and top hat, she in a designer version of her Mindfang outfit that he had custom made for her and between them sat the individual that kept the two from launching across the table trying to kill each other.

"I was most, uh, disappointed when you stabbed me in the chest with my own family lance."

"And I'm really fucking distr8t that you didn't die."

"um, I can imagine. It's a good thing I keep a fully trained medical crew on hand."

Vriska clutched the steak knife in her hand and stared hatefully at the man on the other end of the table. The man who figured out her secret identity. The man who used her as a mole in the police station lest he let her secret slip to someone.

She wanted to stab him again. And again. And again.

Just as he wanted to do the same to her for something she did as Marquise Mindfang...no, it was her pirates that killed Aradia, she wasn't there on that raid. Not that she would have prevented it. She hated Aradia, hated how she was so popular with the other cops, hated that she was still more popular than Vriska was amongst them despite the fact that the bitch was dead and soul-sealed inside a robot.

She really hated that the dead bitch was the main motivation for the worst criminal in Alternia City, let alone the world, to seek her out and torment her mercilessly.

And there was nothing she could do about it. If she destroyed the robot somehow, her secret and her life would be forfeit. If she killed Tavros, the same would be true again.

But for now, the two sat across from each other eyeing each other with hatred. Hatred so intense that it was becoming something else.

And it was all due to the foul consort eyeing them both, a peacekeeper despite its history of killing and eating dozens in some fly-speck of a town up north, then escaping The Veil under its own power. She hated that one too.

Tavros raised his wine glass to Vriska and toasted her.

"To our hatred and to something, uh, I have to propose to you."

"What? What more do you want from me?"

"Um, Come down here and I'll tell you."

Vriska got up from her seat, slipping the knife into the folds of her dress and made her way down to Tavros. As she passed the salamander it turned and hissed at her, she stepped back in fear.

"Easy, uh, Von Salamancer, it's alright."

The salamander sat back down and continued to stare down Vriska as she walked up to Tavros.

She reached Tavros and kneeled down next to him so she was face to face with him. She wanted to bite his face, to tear his horns from his head and jab one down his throat and the other through the harness of his prosthesis legs. She clenched her teeth in anger and choked back a hiss.

"Wh8t. Do. You. Want. From. Me."

He turned to face her and smiled at her, that calculating smart-ass smile he wore whenever he was working out something in his mind.

"Um, I wish to propose an, uh, alliance."

"....Wh8t...."

He reached underneath his blanket and pulled out a small box. Her eyes widened and something roared with frustration in her mind as he opened it to reveal a diamond ring. A very expensive diamond...not that wasn't diamond...Before she or he could do anything else, her hand went for the knife and whipped it out toward's Tavros' face.

Only for her to stop a mere inch away from him because she felt something pressed against her throat. Something cold that chilled her soul, she could feel her blood being **drawn** toward whatever it was.

She looked down to see the consort was in between them. An ebony black blade was in its grasp and the knife tip was merely resting against her larynx. She gulped and could feel the knife press slightly into her skin. The consort's eyes glowed with an evil light until Vriska dropped her steak knife in Tavros' lap and backed away from him.

"Good job Casey, I, uh, imagine that my medical team would not appreciate, uh, two calls in one night."

"hisssssssssss," Casey continued to stare Vriska down as she backed into a chair that was brought forward by the dining room waiting staff.

"I...I...I apologize for th8t..."

Tavros shook one of his hands and his head dismissively at her, making her blood boil yet again. But she stayed in the seat, even after the salamander put away the horrible blade and she could feel the blood in her throat resume its normal flow.

"No need for that Vriska Serket."

He rolled up to her and retrieved the box again. He picked up one of her hands in his free one.

"Once again, uh, I wish to propose an alliance."

"Grrrrrrrr....wh8t kind of alliance you piece of shit?"

He smiled at her, it was forced, she could tell by the way his eyes darted towards the salamander who had maneuvered so that it could be seen from the corner of their eyes.

"One in which we both, uh, benefit."

He took a deep breath and stopped for a moment. Vriska watched as Casey did something and Tavros' eyes glowed for a moment. What the hell was this consort doing? A bodyguard?

"The consort's here to prevent us, uh, from killing each other if you must know."

"How did you?"

"I've watched, uh, how you looked at it with fear and suspicion."

"I thought you wanted to kill me? Th8t's why you showed me all th8t stuff involving Aradia..."

He smiled as her patted her hand, which involuntarily clawed up as he did so.

"It was...it was..." he sighed and continued on, "But then I acquired the services of our friend, Casey Von Salamancer, and it showed me a different way to vent my rage and hatred towards you."

The salamander crossed its arms and smiled smugly at them.

"Do you, uh, know how Von Salamancer gathered its victims?"

"No, I didn't pay attention to anything from th8t 8llshit involving Miss 8lind-8itch and her friends."

"Umm, you really should start paying attention to your, uh, surroundings. It may save your life one day."

"But anyways, our mutual friend used dark magic to manipulate, uh, people's dreams and imagination to put them in a state of vulnerability. I decided to use that ability to, uh, control my darker impulses."

Something truly malevolent flashed across Tavros' face and he glared with bloodlust in his eyes at Vriska.

"Including my urge to see you die in every possible way imaginable as I bathe in your blood and consume your entrails."

Vriska tried to pull back, but Tavros' grip on her hand tightened and prevented her from tumbling backwards. His face lightened up and he smiled at her like he was an innocent child.

"Don't worry, uh, Casey allowed me to sate those urges. Repeatedly."

"Th8t still doesn't explain wh8t you want from me."

"Patience, uh, my dear. I'm getting to that. You see, I used Casey to satisfy those urges. In fact, I satisfied them so often I found a new emotion rising whenever I was slipped into that wonderful dream realm."

Vriska eyed him suspiciously, "What kept the slimy thing from slitting your thro8t while you were asleep and doing us all a f8vor?"

"I provide a stable and, uh, reliable source of food and victims for Casey Von Salamancer."

The salamander laughed and smacked its lips.

"So wh8t was this new emotion you discovered?"

"Love."

Vriska's free hand slapped her mouth as she gasped.

"I found that I, uh, hated you with such intensity that it was warped and, uh, perverted into a mockery of love."

He patted her hand, "Needless to say, I was just as, uh, surprised as you are now. But it happened. My beast was satisfied by the dream realm and continues to be whenever it emerges, thus allowing me to think more clearly. And without that, uh, distraction, I found myself with a certain fondness for you."

He retrieved the hand that was at Vriska's mouth so he could clutch both of them.

"Vriska Serket, Marquise Spinneret of the Mindfang Pirates, will you marry me so that we can unite and control this city and crush all under our heel?"

"Why? Why are you doing this? Wh8t's in it for you?"

"Um, very little actually. But for you, there's so much to gain."

"Like wh8t?"

"You really need, uh, me to spell out the benefits for you in this deal?"

He smiled at her again, this time trying to put some sort of charm into it.

She thought about it and realized he was right, she had tons to gain from this. As Tavros Nitram, he was one of the richest and most powerful individuals in Alternia City, he commanded intense respect, he was rich. As Mr. Pupa, he was personally in charge of what had quickly become the most powerful gang in the city thanks to its ability to use the vast consort population in ingenious ways.

With the prestige from becoming Mrs. Tavros Nitram, she would be able to claw her way out of her dead-end dispatch position in the APD and actually command the respect she deserved. With the power from being married to Mr. Pupa, her pirates could do more than just bother shipping outside the city and occasionally make raids on lightly-guarded docks, both of which had started to become hard as the military took interest in her armada.

But what did he gain from this? What did Tavros Nitram/Mr. Pupa gain from being married to the woman he hated so much and wanted to torture in the horrifying ways he had described to her in loving details just mere hours before hand.

"I get to watch you, uh, writhe in agony as you are forced to ally with the individual you hate most in the city. Knowing that to kill him would mean the loss of everything, not just your life and reputation, but everything that you gained from marrying him would be lost."

He glared at her again.

"That will be enough for me. Especially since it means I gain access to your pirates for my own means and your treasure troves that are currently stashed in no less than eight locations in Dockside, The Narrows, Old Town, the Lost District and the Alternia Island Wilderness Area and contain what I believe are several powerful Skaian artifacts that you either, uh, have no idea are there or are completely unaware of their, uh, true potential."

Vriska's eyes widened as she realized how much Tavros knew about her group. Not even her current first mate, replacement of the one Mr. Pupa's crocodile messenger murdered and left in her house, knew of all those locations let alone what was in the ones he did know about. She then composed herself and looked at the ring he was offering her.

"If you are after those artif8cts, why are you using this one to propose to me? The great Marquise Spinneret."

Tavros barked out a quick laugh, so did the consort watching them.

"This one?"

"Yes, th8t one."

"Because it's a dud, it, uh, has no powers as far as anyone can, uh, tell."

Despite the voice she had screaming in the back of her skull saying that this was all a lie, she found herself believing him.

"Alright, I accept. For our alliance, it's not like I actually have to love you."

He slipped the ring on her finger...

And it felt wonderful, just like the man that was holding her hands. She was going to be so happy. She hugged him and found herself crying. Crying because she knew that not only she was gaining the prestige and riches of the Nitram Household and the gang of Mr. Pupa, she was gaining the love and respect of such a great man.

Deep inside her mind, Vriska knew she was just suckered. Tavros Nitram had just defeated her in the worst way possible. He made her love him and enslaved her to his will. Most of her mind would be his, but just enough was left for her to suffer.

He must have known this...as she pulled away from him and smiled with tears in her eyes at the man she now loved, he smiled at her.

That fucking bastard! He knew the powers of the ring! He knew it and he used it against her to gain control of everything she had!

The part of her mind that was aware of what was going on raged and sputtered as Tavros smiled at Vriska.

"You're mine."

"Kat's Tale" by Wigmund

15 years ago, about 2 weeks after The Green Sun Disaster

The red-blooded boy trudged through the debris-covered alleyways of The Settlements, angrily kicking at anything that got in his way. He had just run away from an orphanage the city was crowding the child survivors of Hiveburg in. He didn't want to be there, he didn't want any more parents. Not after the ones he thanked for losing in that explosion.

He gazed at the ground as he walked along. The Disaster, that was what the grown-ups were calling it, had killed his 'family', killed most everyone he knew, except for the girl who liked to torment him...he missed her. The last time he saw her was when those medics found them near the edge of the disaster area. Some girl about his age was bandaging up Terezi's eyes and they took her off in a helicopter while some search-and-rescue assholes dragged him off to a holding orphanage.

He didn't want to go with them, he wanted to stay with Terezi. She was blinded.

She needed his help.

They didn't listen to him, no one ever listened to him.

Karkat stopped and sniffed the air. Something was dead down here. That smell was everywhere across the city, but particularly strong here. He looked around until he found a lusus corpse. Something tiger-like he figured, dead for awhile. Covered in those lesions he'd seen on other lusus corpses.

He shrugged and started to walk on. He didn't give a fuck about the lusci, he never had one. Too poor. He had asked his father for one and all he got was a beating for it. So Karkat just made do with a stuffed crab doll Terezi had given him...until his father found that and burned it telling him that he shouldn't play with toys for girls.

Karkat choked back tears at the bitter memories, but then he tripped over something covered in newspapers.

"GOG FUCKING DAMMIT!" He got up and brushed away the papers to find what had tripped him, but stopped and retreated back a couple of steps when he found someone there.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

No response, he walked up and prodded the body with his shoe, "ARE YOU DEAD?"

He nearly leapt out of his skin when the body moved slightly and muttered something. He got down on his knees and pulled the body out from underneath the debris covering it. A girl, a little troll girl with rather oversized horns clutching a large blue cat doll. The girl barely opened her eyes and tried to turn her head to look at him, but

was too weak to do so but seemed to satisfy herself with uttering something, "...mew..."

"OH GOG I DON'T NEED THIS," Karkat dropped the girl and started to leave the alleyway, but turned back around to glance at her again. She had tried to crawl after him. She was staring at him with her big eyes, all but pleading for his help.

He glared at her, and back at the alley entrance. He sighed and ran off. The girl just dropped her head, she would have cried if she wasn't so weak. It just hurt too much anymore.

What seemed like an eternity later, she could hear someone walking towards her. She tried to prop herself up, but couldn't. She hurt too much. She was too hungry. She was cold and wet and she missed Pounce who stopped moving a long time ago and started to stink. She tried to keep the rats from biting Pounce, but she wasn't good at that. She could only flail at them, but they just ignored her.

The foot steps got closer and stopped right next to her. She felt a pair of hands roll her over and stick something in her mouth.

"Try to eat this. I also got some water. Please eat. Don't die on me girl..."

She took a bite of what she found out was bread and swallowed it. Then the boy lifted a container of water to her lips and helped her drink from it slowly.

"Don't drink or eat too fast, you'll just make yourself sicker. Take it easier. I'm here. I'm going to help you."

She looked up at him and smiled. She found someone that was going to protect her. She was going to love him forever.

"...thank you..."

...10 years ago...

The two ran through the streets, trying to evade the shopkeeper they had just stolen some food from. They wanted to stay away from him. If he caught them, it be back into another orphanage for the both of them.

They didn't want that.

They wanted to live free.

They stopped in a darkened alcove and waited. Nothing, the shopkeeper had given up chasing them. The city was full of kids like them, stealing what they could to survive. The police would just round them up occasionally and send them to the disaster orphanages - or worse, send them elsewhere in the country to people looking to adopt children of their own.

Karkat and Nepeta didn't want to be split up like that, they lost so much 5 years ago.

They didn't want to lose each other. They were like siblings, Karkat thought. Nepeta was the replacement of the little sister he had lost so long ago. The girl who depended on him for protection from their drunken abusive parents.

When they felt the coast was clear, they left the alcove and took a turn down a side street.

Only to wish they hadn't.

There was blood everywhere.

On the walls, on the street, on the boy curled up in the middle of the carnage.

There were probably three bodies, but the state they were in made it hard to tell.

"OH GOG, WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED HERE?" Karkat stepped gingerly into the bloody mess to reach the boy. Nepeta stayed out of it, pacing along the edge of the crusted pool watching her protector nervously.

"CAN YOU HEAR ME? OR ARE YOU FUCKING STUPID OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT?" Karkat walked up to the boy and reached out for him. The boy's attention went from being nowhere to being focused solely upon Karkat. Those eyes. He saw what had happened to these people. He got to watch it and from the cuts on his body, whoever did this probably didn't know there were any survivors.

"Oh gog...hey, if you want to...you can come with us, we'll help you," Karkat reached out hesitantly to the boy, "We'll help each other."

The boy just stared at him. But then he reached out to Karkat's hand and took it. He pulled himself up and then hugged the boy who had just offered to help him.

"LET GO! LET GO, LET GO! YOU'RE GETTING BLOOD ALL OVER ME!"

The terrified boy released Karkat from the hug, but still grasped his hand. Karkat looked down at that and sighed, "Alright, follow me. We'll get you cleaned up first."

With that, he led the boy out of the bloody alleyway, Nepeta trailing behind them.

...6 years ago...

Karkat watched the man from the shadows. He had something valuable in his pocket, Karkat could see the way he nervously jingled it around there. If it was particularly valuable, maybe Karkat, Nepeta and Gamzee wouldn't be going hungry tonight.

When the man walked by the shadows Karkat was crouched in, the troll leapt out, knocked the man down and stole the item he was jingling around. Karkat bolted down another alleyway, running for his life.

"What the fuck!? Hey, give that back asshole!"

Until he tripped over something.

A red and white cane.

"Don't you know 1t's not n1c3 to t4k3 th1ngs th4t don't b3long to you?" Karkat's ears perked up and he rolled over to look up at his attacker.

A fucking cop...but she was blind...she was...

"Terezi?"

The cop stopped and for lack of a better description stared at him, she sniffed nervously, "...K4rk4t?.."

Karkat got up to his feet, dropped the item he had been trying to steal and ran off. Terezi didn't follow him, instead she was just standing there in the alley, teal streaks started to emerge from underneath her red shades.

Karkat managed to make it a block or two away before he collapsed. He curled up into a ball and began to sob.

...3 years ago...

Karkat realized he was in over his head as soon as he sat down in the limosine. This was too good a deal.

For a bit of work, he and his friends were going to be guaranteed a place to live and a steady food supply.

He should have looked at the fine print of the blood contract and noticed that the price was his and his friend's souls.

But it was too late for that.

Karkat looked up at his benefactor and forced himself to smile as the man told the young man of his plans.

No one ever broke a contract with Mr. Pupa. Not if they wanted to stay alive.

And most definitely not if they wanted to keep those they cared about alive.

Especially when Mr. Pupa handed over one of his Skaian artifacts over to Karkat, "gIVE THIS TO THE, uH, gIRL. i THINK SHE'LL ENJOY THE JOKE."

...1 year ago...

Karkat was numb from the jobs Mr. Pupa would send them on. His concious was weighing too heavily upon him.

They weren't performing these crimes because they needed to find a way, any way, to survive. They were the lackeys of the city's most powerful and dangerous criminal.

He had to do something, something to counteract these feelings of guilt.

Karkat dug up an old hoodie that he stopped wearing a long time ago and also some of his old sickles. He crafted a suit and showed it off to his companions.

"XDD < Karkat's a weasel!"

The name stuck, but Karkat found a new calling.

...1 month ago...

Karkat watched with horror when the girl he had rescued nearly fifteen years earlier was cut down by their mysterious attacker. And he was just as surprised when their attacker ran off when he confronted her.

He waited numbly in the hospital, waiting for word about Nepeta's condition. Only to be relieved when he was told she was safe and would be fine besides an ugly scar across her stomach.

He didn't know what to do when he saw their attacker in Nepeta's hospital room. He really didn't know what to do when she kissed him. He just blushed furiously when Nepeta weakly mentioned that she was going to update that shipping chart she kept drawing on their apartment walls in red jam.

Later, he would run into the vigilante again. This time, instead of fighting, she made out with him.

They would meet several times like that. Never doing anything serious, just her coyly tormenting and teasing him, with him always returning, looking for something more, something more than lust. Something he came to realize, he wasn't going to find with her.

So he started to avoid her.

She didn't like that.

...Last Night...

It was all a blur after he realized Nepeta had downed that *Swamp Wizard*.

He vaguely remembered talking to Gamzee, though he distinctly remembered the subject.

Nepeta...loved him? Not as a brother or a protector, but as someone she genuinely wanted to be with and love?

Gamzee was shocked that Karkat couldn't see it. Apparently Nepeta had been sending signals for years and Karkat didn't notice. Maybe he didn't want to. The shipping charts, the taunting whenever Karkat ran into a pretty girl who expressed any sort of interest in him, everything - it was all Nepeta expressing her jealousy that he wasn't

noticing her.

He hadn't noticed that she'd grown up. That she was beautiful and loved him.

He remembered her fighting Maggie. She had enough from the woman who tormented her Karkat. Then somehow that became a fight in pudding due to the machinations of a bar owner who didn't want to see any more property damage and wanted to pull a profit from having two women fight in his bar.

Karkat remember her winning, walking up to him proudly, lifting him up into the air...when did she grow so much taller than him?..and proclaiming that he was hers.

Then it all went black.

...This morning...

Karkat woke up and was shocked to find Nepeta curled up on top of him.

He slowly pulled himself out from underneath her and looked around their apartment nervously. Karkat walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and grabbed a leftover piece of meat to munch on for breakfast. He smiled at the bottle of clear liquid marked "*In Case of Emergency, Give To Nepeta*" that rested in the back.

Gamzee was already up, watching some children's program on public access while eating his sopor pies. Apparently that made them even more enjoyable Karkat figured.

"HeY tHeRe My MoThErFuCkInG bRo! SlEeP wELL?" Gamzee beamed at Karkat with his usual stupified smile.

Karkat looked nervously at Gamzee and then back at his bed where Nepeta was still curled up, in the same garments she had worn when she beat up the Magpie.

"Gamzee..."

"YeAh?"

"Did anything happen between Nepeta and myself after we left the bar last night?"

"WhY tHe FuCk YoU aSkInG mE? DoN't YoU rEmEmBeR?"

"No, that's why I'm asking if ANYTHING happened between me and Nepeta."

"WhAt Do YoU mEaN, aNyThInG? YoU wAnT tO kNoW iF yOu AnD nEpEtA..."

Gamzee stopped, shook his head and stared clear-eyed at his friend.

"WhY tHe FuCk YoU aSkInG tHaT? Of-FuCkInG-cOuRsE nOtHiNg LiKe ThAt HaPpEnEd. We GoT hOmE aNd YoU jUsT wEnT sTrAiGhT tO bEd. I gUeSs NePeTa DeCiDeD tO cUrL uP oN tOp Of YoU aT sOmE pOiNt."

Karkat breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. I didn't want something like to happen between us this way," He turned so he could watch Nepeta sleep on his bed, "I want to-"

He jumped back when Nepeta suddenly sat upright in his bed, her tail fuzzed and then she bolted for the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Karkat and Gamzee ran up to the door, only to back up when they could hear her retch horribly into the toilet. Poor girl, not only did alcohol turn her into a raving sociopathic brawler, it also ran through her system and did horrible things to her stomach the following day.

"Are you alright Nepeta?" Karkat called through the door, he got a grunt of pain in response.

"Why did you drink that Swamp Wizard last night?"

">((< Urk..."

"You know that's why we don't let you drink alcohol."

"XPP < I know..."

"Do you want to hold off visiting the zoo until tomorrow?"

"X((< Uggghhh...I don't f33l good...but I want to gooooo"

"We'll wait until tomorrow. You'll feel better."

":?? < umm, Karkat?"

"Yes?"

":?? < Why am I wearing underw33r?"

Karkat choked and gasped for air while Gamzee burst out laughing.

":((< And why do I smell like pudding?"

"The Windy Thing" by Wigmund

...15 years ago, during the Green Sun Disaster...

The boy tossed and turned and woke with a start, "MOMMY NO!" He stopped and looked around...this wasn't the airplane...where was he?

He turned around to see that he was on a couch in someone's house and there was a girl on the couch next to him. She was watching that terrible 'Squiddles' cartoon. She glanced at him when he sat up and gave him an annoyed look, "You're awake. Mother was most concerned that your unconsciousness was going to be permanent."

"My what? Where's my mom and dad? Who are you?"

"So many questions from someone who should be thanking me for keeping him company while the world goes crazy."

"What?"

"Didn't you see the explosion? The news says something happened to Hiveburg and the military is gonna come to the city because everyone's gone insane."

"I...I...I only remember that me, my dad and mom were in our plane and we were flying...oh...oh nooooo..."

The girl rolled her eyes as the boy started to sob uncontrollably. She was glad her mother cleaned the blood off of him before she brought him down here. Pity she couldn't find any clothes for him.

"I...I'm sorry John."

"What for? And how do you know my name?"

"Your dad told Mother and myself your name when he brought you to the house. You were unconscious and covered in blood. Your plane crashed nearby."

"Where's my mom?"

Rose looked away from the boy so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes, but he figured out what was going on.

He curled up on the couch, covered himself and sobbed horribly. Rose tried not to cry, but she couldn't help it. So much was going on and she didn't know what to do. But at least she could try to comfort this strange boy. John leaned into her when she wrapped her arms around him and started to cry with him.

An hour later, he cried even more when his father showed up with his hat in his hands and tried to explain to his son what had happened to his beloved mother.

...13 years ago...

He couldn't believe it when his father told him that he was going to get married again. Sure, John liked Rose's mother...but having her as his own mother?

"You can't do this Dad! You can't marry again! What about Mom?"

His father took him by the shoulders and hugged him. James explained to his son that his mother would have wanted him to move on, she would want them both to enjoy life. It was hard for James to explain it in a way that didn't sound hollow and selfish, but he was never one to make speeches...or talk much at all.

Eventually, John had pulled himself around to accepting Lillian as his mother. She was nice and kind and constantly spoiled him. She was nothing like Rose had made her out to be. He never understood why Rose was so bitter towards her. His father said it was just a phase girls went through. So 6 months after his father told him about his intent to marry, he was ecstatic to serve as the ring bearer when Mrs. Lalonde became Mrs. Egbert. Rose never accepted the new last name, she didn't like it. John never knew why.

...10 years ago...

Mrs. Egbert could not have asked for a better son. He was so terribly interested in everything she did. He loved ectobiology, he loved chemistry, he loved the sciences. John did feel bad because he felt like he was a wedge between Rose and her mother. But they both told him that he wasn't.

He didn't want to do that to either of them. He loved them both too much to want to hurt them.

...7 years ago...

High School graduation, John was so excited that he was the valedictorian of his class. He had been accepted into Alternia City University where he already decided to study the ectobiological sciences so he could help Mrs. Egbert with her work. It was going to be great. A year later, he was excited to hear that Rose had followed in his footsteps and was the class valedictorian, but he was startled when she told her family that she wasn't going to college and instead decided to stay at the city's library in the archive department.

...4 years ago...

John was startled when he got a call from Rose. He hadn't spoken to her in years. She basically disappeared after high school.

Several days later, he was even startled even more when he was blindfolded and led deep into the city's sewers. After what felt like hours, the blindfold was removed and he found himself in a massive room. There was ectobiological equipment and Skaian artifacts everywhere. There was another guy wearing black shades and a black-haired woman there as well as Rose and a female troll that was standing next to her.

"Uh, Rose? What's going on here?"

"Well John, I've been busy for the past few years."

"Yeah, I can see that. So what's all this?"

Rose waved her arms as she walked towards him, "This, this is S.E.E.R. and I'm formally inviting you into our Society."

"What's S.E.E.R.?"

"The Society for the Elevation of Ectotechnological Research. I founded this group to help protect this city from the ravages of the artifact-powered street gangs by seeking to contain and understand these artifacts and finding better ways for them to help society as a whole."

Rose grabbed John by his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"I want you to help us John."

"Sure, why not? What do you need me to do?"

Rose took a step back from John and reached into a pocket to pull out a ring.

"This artifact will let you tap the powers of the winds and enhance your strength and durability."

"OH SHIT! I CAN BECOME A SUPERHERO!"

Rose glanced at everyone else as John danced around like a fool, but she was startled when he suddenly kissed her and took the ring from her hand. Kanaya glowered at him.

"Thank you sis, you won't regret this!"

John placed the ring upon his finger and was transformed. His lab coat and slacks were transformed into a blue outfit with a ridiculously long hood.

"OH YEAH!"

"So, what do you plan on calling your superhero persona?"

John looked at himself in a nearby mirror, flexed a bit before turning back to face everyone in the room.

"Egbertman."

The guy with the black shades smacked himself in the face for some odd reason.

...2 years ago...

He'd never been in a police station before, so John was rather cautious when he walked inside the APD Headquarters.

They invited him there because they wanted to have a meeting with the city's resident super hero population so they could learn to coordinate with the police and not cause any more incidents like that incident involving CrowBro wiping out a DOOF team when they busted in on him going after a MC drug lab.

John walked around the HQ talking with the various police officers, he found himself chatting away with a sergeant who was incredibly impressed with Egbertman's strength and durability...creepily impressed and obsessed. John eventually excused himself and tried to find his way to the conference room he was supposed to meet up with Space Lass, CrowBro and the CuttlefishCuller (who was acting rather heroic whenever it struck her bizarre fancy).

He opened a door and stuck his head in to find out if it was the right place when a woman yelled at him.

John jumped back, "I'm s-s-sorry."

John started to apologize, but stopped when the woman opened the door wider so she could yell at him directly. She flipped her hair and glared at him.

And John's heart fluttered.

"I, uh, I...I, uh, I..."

"I, uh, wh8t? Spit it out you idiot!"

"I was just looking for the conference room where the supers are to meet up with the

APD Command..."

"Does this look like a conference room? C8n't you read the sign?"

"I'm sorry, I was just wanting to ask for directions."

The woman glared at him, pouted her bottom lip and tossed her hair again.

"8luh, fine. Th8t room's just down the hall. It's the 8ig dou8le doors m8rked 'Conference Room'."

John smiled at her, prompting her to do the same to him.

"Thank you, Miss...uh?"

"Vriska, Vriska Serket."

"Well, thank you again Vriska Serket."

John smiled at her as he back down the hall, only turning around to watch where he was going when she went back into the dispatch room and closed the door.

...6 months ago...

That was fun.

Well, except for that bit where he got shot in the chest. But hey, he got to help save the day and the life of the Sergeant Zahhak.

John wondered what got Rose so upset when he told her about the guys who took over the place.

He also wondered why Kanaya would jab him whenever he would smile at Rose.

She was a strange woman.

...Now...

Egbertman was flying over the city for the first time in months. Rose, Mom and Dad had all insisted that he take time to heal up properly before going out on patrol. It took them a while to convince him, but they eventually did.

But now, he could enjoy protecting the city again.

As he flew near the Docks, he received word from the radio interceptor Dave gave him that something was going on.

Shit yeah, some action. John checked his new hammer and readied himself.

This was going to be fun.

"Disentangled, Part 1" by Wigmund

Dockside, backbone of Alternia City's criminal activity. Everyone had a secret warehouse here, every gang would raid something here and every bit of contraband entering the city passed through here at some point.

And it was the favorite prowling ground for Egbertman when he was out on patrol. He was basically guaranteed action every night he flew around the area.

Tonight proved to be no exception when the receiver on his belt sparked to life as the police notified each other about a possible break-in at a warehouse/dock complex close to John's position. He loved this gadget Rose gave him following the Nakdoofenpap Tower incident, now he'd know what was going on without having to stumble upon it.

John flew to the approximate area the police were talking about and landed. Flying directly into a situation led to bad results he found out when he first started his superhero career. He was harder to kill, but he still could be badly hurt. Bullets stung like hell and having Kanaya pull them out hurt worse.

John crept through the darkened alleys that were between the incredible number of Dockside storage facilities, light industrial buildings and randomly stacked cargo containers. He could hear something crashing and breaking up ahead, but due to the darkness he couldn't see anything.

Eventually, the superhero reached the end of the shadows and took in what was happening in front of him.

Pirates.

Lots of pirates.

They were moving in and out of a warehouse and loading what looked like random containers into a collection of speed boats. John flew up to the top of the building, making sure to not reveal himself to his opponents. Had to get a good position to reveal himself from.

Best way to strike fear in the hearts of the wicked.

The Mindfangs worked diligently under the gaze of their commander, the Marquise Spinneret. She stood aside a collection of pallets and yelled orders at them.

"Come on you lazy 8ums! Work faster! Work h8rder!"

"We don't h8ve all night!!!!!!!"

She pulled out her sword and waved it in the air, her loyal crew just grunted and kept hauling the cargo from the warehouse to their boats.

One of them dropped a container and everyone froze. The Marquise shrieked in rage.

"Wh8t are you doing you fucking idiot!"

She jumped down from the pallet stack and started walking slowly towards the poor soul who had just incurred her wrath.

"Do you know wh8t you just dropped so carelessly? Dooooooooo you?"

The man shook his head as he crawled backwards away from her, the rest of her crew watched for a bit before getting back to work.

"Do you realize just how lucky you are th8t you didn't 8low us all to Hell?"

"I...I'm sorry...."

Spinneret stopped and stared down at the cowering pirate, her eyes glinted as she smiled at him.

"You're s-s-s-s-s-s-sorry? Wh8t kind of pathetic shit is th8t?"

The man started to speak up again, but was stopped when the Marquise ran her sword through his chest. He just let out a miserable gasp and slumped down.

Spinneret wiped off her blade and put it back into her scabbard. She hated it when she had to do that to her own crew. But her love had told her that it was the only way to keep them in line.

You couldn't have your employees getting out of line, he said.

And he was right, he was always right about stuff like this. She didn't even have to yell at her crew to have them get back to work this time. Tavros was such a wonderful husband and ally.

She strode back to the pallets she was standing on top of and settled with leaning against them to watch the pirates collect what they had been sent here for.

Suddenly, there was gust of air and the sound of laughter from the roof of the warehouse.

"Well, well, what do we have here? Pirates pirating pirated goods?"

Spinneret glared at the wanna-be hero as he looked down at the pirates who were giving the boy various confused and disgusted looks.

"Th8t was a horri8le joke 8oy!"

Egbertman scratched his head and smiled at everyone below.

"Yeah...yeah it was.

But still, stop whatever it is you're doing and surrender!"

"Or wh8t 8oy?"

"Or face the righteous justice of the hammer of Egbertman!"

Spinneret threw back her head and laughed.

"And I thought tonight was going to 8e 8oring, 8ut this will make up for it."

The pirate captain waved at her crew and then pointed at the superhero.

"Get him 8oys!"

John leapt down from the rooftop into the middle of the pirates, he activated his windy powers as he landed, creating a great burst of air that blasted everyone and everything nearby back from him. People and crates smashed into other people and crates.

"W8TCH OUT YOU STUPID FUCK!"

John laughed as he made his way through the pirate crew. They stood little chance against him when they were only using swords and clubs.

"I'm sorry, am I hurting you poor pirate playmates?"

John blasted another group of pirates away, then he made his way towards the speed boats. He readied one of his most powerful blasts and released it just as the Marquise screamed in rage and terror.

"NO IT'S ALL FUCKING EXPLOSIVE YOU STUPID 8OY!"

John had just enough time to turn around and give the Marquise Spinneret a confused glance before the speed boats exploded, throwing him back through the walls of the warehouse where he crashed into more cargo containers. The pirates in the warehouse ran in terror as flames roared outside and the contents of the crates John's fall busted rolled out.

John got up and looked at the spherical balls that were on the ground.

"Oh shit..."

"Oh shit is quite right 8oy..."

John looked up to see Spinneret walking towards him, sword drawn.

"Do you h8ve 8ny id8a how much you just fucked up my pl8ns? Do you?"

Her eyes glowed with rage and John reached for his hammer only to find that he lost it in the explosion.

"Not again"

"Do you h8ve 8ny id8a wh8t I'm going to do to you 8efore I h8nd you over to Mr. Pupa?"

John quickly looked up at the pirate queen and saw that she was right up next to him. Smiling.

"Mr. Pupa? So the rumors that the Mindfangs have aligned with him are true then."

The Marquise Spinneret's seven-pupiled eye twitched involuntarily. John stopped and looked closely at her. He took a couple of steps back, only to find himself backed up against the crates again.

"Wait a moment...I think I've met you before..."

The pirate took a step back, her eyes glancing around nervously.

"I've never met you 8efore 8oy."

"Yes, it was at the APD HQ about two years or so ago. I went there to attend a meet the police command and I accidentally opened the door to dispatch."

Spinneret's eyes widened in terror...and something else...

"You're Vriska Serket aren't you."

"I AM THE MARQUISE SPINNERET OF THE MINDFANGS, 8OY!"

Spinneret swung her sword at John, but he ducked out of the way as her sword buried itself deep into the wood of the crate. The pirate screamed in terror and rage as a sound erupted from within.

John bolted forward, grabbing the pirate and they flew out of the warehouse just as it exploded in flames. The blast wave caught John and tossed him. He dropped Vriska and they tumbled along the docks. They slowly got up and Vriska glared at John. Blood covered her face from cuts on her forehead.

"You fool! You've ruined all of my plans!"

She stalked towards John, her hands clenching into claws.

"I won't let my loving husband get ahold of you now."

John slowly backed up, occasionally losing his balance when another round of explosions rocked the area. Flaming debris rained down around the two.

"I'm going to enjoy this 8oy. I..."

Vriska stopped and clutched her head in agony.

"GAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!! GET OUT OF MY HE8D YOU MONSTER! LET ME GO!"

"We can't let th8t happen, wh8t a8out our love?"

Vriska screamed and argued with herself as she rolled on the docks. John slowly made his way up to her.

"Let me help you..."

Vriska propped herself up on her knees and looked at John.

"8ack off! I don't need anything from yo-"

She stopped when something bounced next to her. Vriska and John looked in terror at the round white object that landed next to the troll.

"...no..."

The resulting explosion threw Vriska off the docks and into the dark waters of Alternia Bay.

John quickly got back to his feet and looked into the waters. There was nothing but a cerulean stain upon the surface.

He quickly looked around. No one else was coming. The pirates had fled when he destroyed their boats. Sirens were blaring as the city's overworked fire department made their way to the docks.

John took a deep breath and dived into the polluted waters.

"Spider's Child" by Wigmund

Vriska Serket couldn't believe this was happening as she sank into the waters of Alternia Bay. She watched the fires from the Cueball explosions light up the surface of the water before the cerulean cloud leaking from her left side clouded the surface and her own vision went dark.

It was so cold.

So lonely.

As she drifted off, Vriska thought back upon her sad and tormented life...

...15 years ago...

Vriska was honestly relieved when she watched the goddamned spider thing her parents found and foisted off on her die a horrible slow death from The Tumors.

The only regret the girl felt at the time was that she hadn't fed her so-called mother and father to the damned thing during it's pain-fueled rage. Then everything would have been better. She wouldn't have had to explain to anyone why she let this lusus die. She wouldn't have to look forward to being beaten. She wouldn't have to look forward to being locked in the utility closet with the water heater for days.

She wouldn't have had to go through all those things when her parents found out the very next day.

It was a week before they let her out of the closet.

Even then, she had to catch rats for food. She wasn't worth the table scraps was she dear? No way bitch, that damned brat deserved worse, but if she vanished people would ask too many questions - can't have that. Can't have the cops snooping around here. They might find the pit where our spider used to be before the little bitch let it die.

She's not worth the scraps.

She's not worth killing.

She's not worth abandoning in the consort-infested sewers.

She's not worth anything.

...10 years ago...

Somehow, the girl survived long enough to enter junior high. She was an outsider even there. No one liked her. No one trusted her.

She smelled weird. She always wore tattered clothes. Her eye was weird. So many things wrong with her and so many reasons to not give her a chance.

Except there was one girl who did. One girl did care.

The jade-blooded angel who spoke so eloquently. The one who would let Vriska spend the night at her place so she could have fresh food, bathe and clean clothes.

They came to love each other...until the girl saw what was hidden beneath Vriska's skin...then she left Vriska...left her behind for another...

The poor girl sobbed as she walked back to the place where her parents lived. They beat her because she was gone for so long. They wanted to keep track on their meal ticket. Hard to get welfare checks when the reason you got them wandered off.

She wished they would just die.

8 years ago

Her wish was granted when the Midnight Crew burst into her house late one night.

Vriska hide in the very water closet that her parents would lock her in to punish her. Now it was her salvation.

She heard the screams of terror from her mother and father as Hearts Boxcar and Diamonds Droog dragged them from their beds and into the living room. They screamed and begged and sobbed for mercy from Spades Slick.

But he was never one to be merciful.

Except when it came to granting a quick death.

Which he didn't grant the two trolls who had tried to manipulate their way into his turf and steal from him.

Vriska curled up and tried to block out the screams as the two were slowly beaten and battered and stabbed. Her head snapped up when the door knob rattled. She tried to hide, but there was no where to go.

She stared in terror when the fourth member of the Crew opened the door and looked down upon her. He started to reach for the girl, but he stopped.

He stopped when she reached for her temples and concentrated on him.

"Le8ve me alone...ple8se...le8ve me alone..."

She sniffed, "You...you didn't find anything in here..."

Clubs Deuce looked at her for a moment, stepped back and then closed the door.

She heard him walk away and then Spades Slick started yelling at him. They were looking for her. They wanted her blood as well. They wanted her to suffer.

But she wasn't their main target. So who cared about the girl?

Who cared about her?

No one did.

Vriska listened to the four Dersites leave the house and slam the front door shut.

What would she do know? Where would she go? She had no family. No one cared about her...

Vriska started to crawl out of the water closet, but stopped when her hand brushed against something.

She pulled the thing up so she could look at it.

It was a picture she drew years ago while locked in the closet. It was a girl with an eyepatch and a hook for a hand.

It was what Vriska wished she could be, free and far away from everyone and everything and the master of her world.

She wished she was the Marquise Spinneret Mindfang.

Vriska crawled out of the closet and looked at her parents' corpses.

What was stopping her?

...5 years ago...

Finally, it was all over. She made it through high school, somehow she was able to enter the police academy and made it through that. No one took the time to see if she was the mighty Marquise Spinneret.

Why would they? Why would they ever think this pathetic ugly troll was the great and beautiful Spinneret, admiral of the Mindfang Pirates, scourge of the waters of Alternia City?

Why would they bother with someone they thought so lowly of that they'd stick her in dispatch? What kind of post was that?

Vriska didn't mind. It let her plan better and she'd get some financial support on the side when she'd slip information to interested parties in the city. It let her improve herself. It let her be the woman she wanted to be.

Pity no one liked that woman. That called her a huge bitch. They called her fat. They mocked her.

She hated them all.

She especially hated that damned Aradia. She was so beautiful, so graceful, so perfect, so happy. Vriska hated her for all of that.

When Vriska received the dispatch call from an Officer Sollux Captor screaming that Aradia was down due to a Mindfang ambush, she smiled. She hadn't planned on this. She had sent her pirates there to collect some gold that another gang was smuggling into town. They weren't supposed to harm Megido.

Vriska smiled externally, but deep down inside she felt sick.

She didn't want her to die. She didn't want that. She hated Megido, but not enough to kill her.

...3 years ago...

What did she do to deserve this? Why was Mr. Pupa tormenting her? He was after her for some reason.

Worse than that, he knew her identity. He would let it slip if she didn't do what he wanted. She would truly suffer at his hands, he told her.

All the miserable things she had gone through in life would be looked upon with nothing but joy and happiness if she displeased him, he told her.

So to protect herself, she worked for him. Never overtly, but she became a pawn in his game.

She hated him. She hated him so much.

She truly despised him when he'd invite her over for dinners and a evening together.

She'd spend the next day in the shower trying to feel clean again.

But it would never help.

It never did.

...3 months ago...

She was so happy. She'd never been happier. She gained a wonderful husband and a wonderful family.

Nothing could ever spoil this.

I will break free you bastard! I will escape this damned trap you asshole!

...Now...

Darkness consumed her, but for the first time in months she could think clearly again.

At least she'd die with her free will, she'd die w-

Someone touched her.

She could feel herself being pulled from the water and then there was the sensation of flying. What was going on?

Who cared about her? Why was this happening?

The wind rushed by her, but she couldn't see anything, she couldn't move, she couldn't speak.

The flying stopped and she could hear others nearby. They started arguing.

"Where's Kanaya?! Get her over here dammit!"

"John!? Why did you bring her here?"

"She's hurt. She needs help."

"What she needs is a sword through the forehead."

"Can I do it?"

"Back the fuck off! We're going to help her!"

"Why? She's done so many terrible things."

"I-I don't know, but I couldn't just let her die."

"Yes you could have, you could have left her in Alternia Bay. Let the bottom feeders eat her."

"I'm not that way. I'm not a heartless fucking bastard."

"JOHN!"

"No, it's true. It's the only reason I even help this group, so I can help other regardless of what they've done in the past."

"But, John..."

"Everyone deserves a second chance! No matter how evil or crazy they are or were! Now where is Kanaya?"

"I Am Here John, And Yes, I Will Help Vriska."

"Wut."

"She Deserves A Second Chance. She Needs Someone To Help Her. We Will Do That."

"YES!"

"Why Kanaya? Why does Vriska deserve this?"

"I Will Tell You Later Rose. But Right Now I Need To Stop All Of This Bleeding."

Vriska would have smiled if she could have.

Someone cared.

Someone was there.

She drifted off into the darkness.

"Disentangled, Part 2" by Wigmund

The troll known as the Marquise Spinneret of the Mindfang Pirates slowly opened her eye and looked around the room she found herself in.

It was bright and sterile. A hospital room? No, there was something different about this room.

She tried to sit up, but found herself unable to prop herself up. Something was wrong with her left side.

She laid back down and reached over to see why her left arm wasn't....there....Vriska felt her face and found a bandage over her left eye. Most of her left side was covered in bandages and ached.

She looked around to find someone to help her, but the only person here was some boy curled up in a chair next to her bed.

Wait a fucking moment, that was Egbertman...no, he had his hood down...it looked like that guy who worked at the University that she'd see help the APD occasionally when it needed expert advice on something.

She glared at him and tried to speak, nothing came out but a weak squeak. But apparently that was enough for the man to wake up.

"You're awake! Good, do you need anything Vriska?"

She mimed drinking something, he nodded and left the room quickly.

She looked around the room. Definitely not a hospital room, the hall outside the door was different. So where was she?

After a couple of minutes, Egbertman returned with a glass of water. He propped her up in her bed and handed her the glass. Thank gog she was right handed, otherwise this would have gotten awkward. Vriska took a drink and washed the gunk from Alternia Bay out her throat.

"Where am I?"

"Uh, I really can't tell you that considering this place is supposed to be secret and all that."

Vriska cocked her only available eyebrow at him. Secret, huh? There were only so many groups with secret bases in even this city. If Egbertman was here, it narrowed down that list considerably.

"How long w8s I out?"

"About three days-"

Vriska spat out the water she was drinking to speak again and stared at Egbertman in terror.

"Three d8ys?!?!?!?"

Vriska started to tear at the wires and cords that linked her to the various bits of

equipment that monitored her health. Egbertman tried to calm her down as a soft alarm sounded in the room.

"Vriska! Vriska! Calm down!"

"I c8n't I c8n't I c8n't-" Cerulean tears poured from her right eye, her left one just stung horribly.

A troll woman bolted into the room, "What Is Going On Here John? Why Were We Not Alerted That Vriska Had Woken Up?"

John *His name is John* turned to look at...oh gog not her.

Vriska froze as she realized who the troll trying to get her to lay back down while she checked the bandages was.

"K-k-k-kan8ya?"

"Hello Vriska. It Has Been A While Since We Met Face-To-Face Like This."

"Ten ye8rs...I knew you worked at the APD Headquarters as a Medical Liaison...but I could never 8ring myself to say hello..."

"To Be Honest, I Would Not Have Wanted A Visit From You. I Knew What You Were Up To."

Vriska looked away from the troll she once loved in shame. *You ruin everything for yourself, you worthless 8road.*

Vriska looked up at Kanaya again, "Wh8t happened to me?"

"According To Egbertman, You Were Caught In The Explosive Blast Of A Cueball And The Resulting Force Threw You Into The Waters Of Alternia Bay Where You Would Have Drowned If It Was Not For The Foolish Actions Of This Hero."

"Wh8t do you mean?"

"He Was The One Who Convinced Myself And Some Others-"

Those people Vriska could barely remember arguing while she was semi-unconscious, that was John defending her from a quick execution?

"-To Treat Your Wounds And See If We Could Find Other Ways To Help You."

Kanaya walked over to some counters and pulled up a tray. She brought it over to Vriska, inside it she say her engagement *enslavement* ring and wedding ring.

"We Agreed To Do So Due To This Artifact We Found On Your Former Left Hand. A Mind-Slaving Ring. We Now Know What Tavros Did To You. So We Could Not Bring Ourselves To Say No."

John grimaced angrily as Kanaya talked about the ring.

Vriska started to hyperventilate as Kanaya told her about the ring and its effects. She remembered. She remembered what Tavros did to her and how that infernal thing forced her to love him for it and to agree to everything.

Vriska batted the tray out of Kanaya's hands, sending the rings clattering away.

"Was John telling the truth when he s8id I w8s out for three d8ys?"

"Yes, But What Does Th-"

"L8t me go! I need to g8t 8ack to Nitr8m M8nor!"

Vriska started to scream this repeatedly in terror as John and Kanaya tried to restrain her.

"What's so important there Vriska? Why do you need to get there so badly?"

Vriska paused and stared at John, the man who was looking at her with so much

concern in his eyes.

"Because if I don't return, he'll kill our baby."

John and Kanaya froze and stared at Vriska.

"A Child? You And Tavros Nitram Have A Child?"

Vriska nodded.

"How Old?"

"About two years..."

"He'd murder his own child if you didn't return?"

Vriska looked into John's eyes and saw the pure righteous rage that burned within them and she nodded. He looked at Kanaya and she turned to meet his gaze.

"Tighten her bandages so she can travel. I'm going to help her save her child."

"But John-"

"DAMMIT KANAYA! THERE'S A CHILD IN DANGER, THIS IS NOT A FUCKING TIME TO ARGUE WITH ME!"

Kanaya stepped back from the suddenly very serious and very angry superhero. She'd never seen him like this before. He was shaking with rage. He pointed at Vriska.

"Patch her up, I'm going to get another hammer and then we're going to leave the base."

"But What About Rose And Dave?"

John paused at the doorway and looked over his shoulder, "Let me worry about my sister and those smug pricks."

He stalked out of sight, leaving Kanaya and Vriska alone.

"What's going on?"

Kanaya smiled knowingly and just settled with patting her former lover on her right shoulder.

"John Is Just Being The Man I Have Always Known Him To Be."

Vriska didn't like the blindfold, but she calmed down when John said it was a safety precaution forced upon him by Rose. Secret location and all that bullshit. But after what felt like a minute of flying through tightly constricted areas, John removed the blindfold so Vriska could look over the city.

"Beautiful isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

John sputtered and blushed, "The city...I was talking about the city..."

Vriska would have smiled, but she was too concerned about someone else.

For the first time in her life, Vriska was truly concerned about someone other than herself.

She looked down and watched what must have been the upper reaches of The Settlements and The Narrows pass underneath them far below. Nitram Manor wasn't far away. She looked north and could just barely make out the infernal place perched upon the cliff that gave it an incredible view of the city.

It was lit up and looked like it was expecting company.

Mr. Pupa knew something had happened and he had made plans.

"There's going to be a fight..."

"Good."

They landed on the upper back porch that led to Vriska and Tavros' suite. There was no one outside.

Odd, usually the Manor grounds were crawling with Nitram's 'personal guards'. Something was wrong.

Vriska opened the door and she and John entered her bedroom. It was dark and quiet.

No one was there.

She started to hyperventilate, but John reassuringly placed a hand upon her shoulder and squeezed it very slightly. She turned and looked into his eyes. So caring.

They walked through the suite and opened the door that led into the room where the young Mrs. Nitram slept and played.

Vriska closed her eye as she opened the door and walked in.

"mOMMY!!!!!!!!!"

Vriska burst into tears as she ran up to her little girl and embraced her.

"My baby! You're alright!"

The little girl with large horns looked up at her mother and started to tear up.

"mOMMY HURT? wH8T HAPPEN TO MOMMY?"

Vriska carried her girl over to John, "Nothing happened Portia, nothing at all. In fact, Mommy has never felt better..."

The girl hugged her mother tightly, causing her to grimace when the girl touched the areas where she was burned from the blast. Vriska looked at John and smiled, he smiled back at her and wiped away a tear. *Was he crying for me?*

"Is that everything?"

"No, I w8nt to give you and your group something. Some of Pupa's Artifacts."

John's eyes widened and he smiled grimly. He nodded and retrieved his hammer as he followed Vriska through the quiet mansion.

Something is wrong you idiot!

Vriska shook her head to knock the thoughts from her head. Of course it was too easy. Tavros had planned something, better to cause shit on his turf than allow him to chase her down.

There was no escape from his wrath. At least this way Vriska could inflict some wrath of her own.

She, her daughter and John reached a hatch that she opened easily. They got onto the elevator and it traveled down into the earth.

John was nervous, but he tried to hide it. He looked over at Vriska's daughter who was eyeing him nervously.

"What's your name?"

The girl buried herself in her mother's hair. Vriska sighed and looked over at John.

"Her name is Portia."

"That's a pretty name."

"She's named after a genus of intelligent spiders."

"It's still a pretty name."

Vriska smiled as she jostled her girl to try and get her to into a more comfortable position.

The doors of the elevator opened with John standing in front of Vriska with his hammer held at the ready. Nothing happened.

They walked into the dark corridors of Mr. Pupa's inner sanctum and found it empty.

"Something is wrong..."

"Yeah...usually criminal bases have more angry thugs trying to keep me out. I'm not used to this. Which way to the Artifacts?"

Vriska led John down the dark corridors and to a vault door.

Dammit, Tavros never told her the code. She kicked the key panel and snorted angrily. John just smiled and walked forward. He swung his hammer at the door and the entire base reverberated loudly. Clanging echoes sounded from deeper in the base.

The superhero reached into the hole he knocked into the supposedly unbreakable door and gripped something. He grimaced as he pulled back and removed the entire door. Vriska and Portia ogled him as he tenderly placed the door off to the side so they could enter the room.

John smiled when he entered the room and saw all the artifacts laying around. This was going to be too easy. Vriska glanced around nervously, this wasn't the entire collection. It should have been, but many of the spots in which items were stored were empty.

Tavros expected this...

"Grab what you can, we need to get out of here now."

John nodded, pulled a sack from the satchel he had and quickly loaded up everything in the room. Vriska was amazed he was able to do so. John crumpled the still empty-looking sack back up and placed it in his satchel. He smiled at her.

"Bag of storing, Kanaya found it in Police storage. I think the Karkat Gang was using it during their kitty heists."

They quickly left the room and made their way back to the elevator, only to find that the corridor was blocked off by a blast gate. John knocked on it and shook his head.

"Any emergency exits?"

Vriska started to breath heavily as she realized they had fallen into a trap.

"Yes, it's this way."

She led John deeper into the base, towards the emergency exits that would have led out the base of the cliffs.

But they stopped when they walked by and open hangar. One Vriska had never seen before.

They looked inside and saw several glowing liquid filled tubes and tons of medical equipment and computers. John walked towards the tank and touched it.

From inside the tank, a fist punched the containing glass. The room echoed with the thunderous noise. Portia screamed.

The noise continued as something else slammed into the glass repeatedly. Reddish bursts of light erupted with each bang.

"Noooooooooooo....."

The glass shattered, spilling the green fluids across the room.

Vriska backed up in horror, trying to shield her daughter from what very well may be her doom. John backed up, confused. He glanced back and forth between Vriska and the being that was inside the tank.

"What's wrong? What's going on Vriska?"

He looked back at the figure that emerged from the steam and smoke that erupted as the fluids caused small electrical fires within the nearby equipment. She was clad in what looked like leather armor with a definite pirate flair, much like Vriska's Marquise costume.

She just floated in the air silently and stared at Vriska, smiling. It was a smile that promised horrible things.

"Hell0 there Vriska. L0ng time, n0 see."

"Arisen" by Wigmund

...15 years ago...

The ram-horned girl clutched her head and screamed as the horrifying pain echoed with it. Maroon tears streaked down her face as she fell to the floor of the Captor household where she had gone to help a little boy who had fallen into a rose bush when the Disaster happened moments earlier.

"Honey! Are you alright? Don't worry, Doctor Scratch is on his way here to look at Sollux. He'll help you two dear..."

Mrs. Captor's voice faded away as Aradia passed out from the horrible pain.

She woke up later to find a man in white leaning over her, peering into her eyes.

"Are you fine, my dear?"

"Yes sir...what happened?"

"Not sure, I imagine we'll all find out later."

Aradia sat up and looked over at the couch where Sollux was still asleep, but his head was bandaged up.

"Is Sollux okay?"

"Yes, he is."

"Something happened to his eyes, so we've bandaged them closed until we're sure he's alright."

Doc Scratch got up, nodded to Mrs. Captor and left the house. He was going to busy, so many in the city needed help. Aradia got up from the small love seat she was on and walked over to Sollux. She looked at him worriedly. She jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry dear, I'll let you know when he wakes up and is feeling better. Then you can come by and say hello to the boy you just helped."

Aradia looked up at Mrs. Captor and smiled, the woman smiled back at her. Mrs. Captor knew the Megidos well, and they all saw how the two kids acted whenever they got into close proximity. This was going to be a good thing for both them.

...11 years ago...

After the Disaster, she made sure she was there for Sollux. She wanted to be there for him no matter what. They loved each other. Sure, they were just young teens. But it was love.

Aradia cradled Sollux who was going through problems with the psychic powers they and other trolls had started to manifest as they aged after the Green Sun Disaster. He cried in pain, his head ached and his eyes burned. Her head hurt as well, but his pain concerned her more.

"It's alright Sollux, I'm here for you."

"I'll always be here for you..."

...9 years ago...

As the years passed, Aradia found herself volunteering to help people at the hospital. She enjoyed helping others.

It was there she first met Tavros Nitram, sole survivor of the massacre that wiped out his family. He was severely wounded, but thankfully the city had one of the best cyberneticists working on him.

But now he needed help and Aradia was there to help him. They were the same age and Tavros' face lit up every time she walked into the room.

...8 years ago...

Aradia was a marvel. She volunteered to help the needy, she was kind, she was beautiful, she was intelligent.

She was graduating high school a year early with the boy she loved and together they were going to enter the police academy. Together, they would follow his father's footsteps. Mrs. Captor was so proud of them, as were Aradia's own parents.

Even Tavros Nitram was there to congratulate her. Despite his prosthesis not working, he made an effort to come see the girl who had done so much for him. She introduced him to Sollux, she didn't see the pain and sadness in Nitram's eyes.

Six months later, they all met up again when now Recruits Captor and Megido graduated from the police academy and were accepted into the Alternia City Police Department.

She cried as Mrs. Captor hugged her and Sollux and wished them well.

"D0n't w0rry Mrs. Capt0r-"

"Plea2e, call me 'Mama'. After all you've done for my Honeybee you've earned that."

Aradia beamed at the woman who cared so much for the girl her boy loved.

"D0n't w0rry Mama, I'll keep S0llux safe. I pr0mise..."

...5 years ago...

It was a dark night on the docks when Officers Megido and Captor were sent in to investigate reports that the Mindfangs were raiding yet another warehouse.

She and Captor used their powers to silently enter the area to surprise the pirates while they were preoccupied with their loot. They split up so they could find the criminals.

That was a horrible mistake.

As Aradia silently moved down an alleyway, there were people waiting for her. She found herself surrounded. She started to ready herself for a fight when a shot rang out.

Aradia looked down at her chest and at the maroon stain growing on the front of her uniform. She collapsed to her knees and clutched her chest as the pirates closed in on her. She would have screamed for Sollux, but the first blow knocked her out cold.

Sollux would find her an hour later.

She could sense him nearby, but she couldn't see him. She couldn't move. Please Sollux, don't leave me.

For months, she would feel his presence next to her. He was always there. Holding her hand, talking to her, crying. He wouldn't leave her. She didn't want him to leave.

But then, the others came and took him away.

They told him to give up hope.

Please Sollux, don't give up on me.

Please. I'm still here.

Don't leave me alone in the darkness.

...3 years ago...

One day, someone came into the room and put something on her head. There was a crowd nearby. Some metal clanked next to her.

What was going on.

They were talking to each other, but Aradia had been alone in her mind for so long she couldn't follow them. If she had, she would have told them to stop.

She didn't want her soul ripped from her body. It hurt so much when it happened.

It...

Awakened.

Aradia awoke and looked at her new body. Sleek titanium composite, enhanced joints and reinforcement. She was alive again.

But she couldn't feel anything.

She couldn't feel anything anything at all. No hot, no cold, no pain, no joy, no sorrow, nothing.

But she was alive again.

That was all that mattered they told her. So she believed them.

Aradia imagined she should have felt regret when she watched the morticians take away her former body, now just a dead shell. But she couldn't, she just watched them pull the sheets over her former face, now gaunt from years of laying in that bed, and drag the bed away.

Later that week, she returned to her former job.

That caused a commotion. She was okay with that. Even though it was Sollux Captor throwing the biggest fit, she was still okay with that.

Where are they taking her? Her soul still hurt from whatever it was that machine did to her. She could remember the crowd being so happy when the metal thing next to her moved. But then they took her away.

Please.

Don't bury me.

I'm still alive.

Please. Someone help me.

Please, I don't want to die.

...1 year ago...

Officer Aradia Megido, now one of the commanding officers of the Division Of Overwhelming Force, was fine with working with Sergeant Equius Zahhak. She just wish he would stop sweating every time he was near her. She was not okay with that.

She was a model police officer. Her metal frame made her the best option for dealing with armed criminals. Though her cold emotionless face made it hard for her to get along with the citizens of Alternia City. That made her regret not being truly alive. She remembered being able to talk to anyone without any trouble.

Everyone had loved her back then. Now, they were suspicious of her.

But, she was okay with that. At least they stopped sticking magnets to her while she shut down nightly to run systems diagnostics.

It was green.

Where was she? She couldn't move, her body hurt. Her mind hurt.

She could hear a voice coming from somewhere. It reassured that everything was going to be alright. She was going to be okay.

...6 months ago...

Officer Megido sat on top of a nearby tower and watched the carnage erupt inside the Nakdoofenpap Tower. It was always interesting to watch Sergeant Zahhak at work. He took it so seriously.

She activated her internal transmitter/receiver systems and used those to hack her way into the terrorists' radio system. They seemed to enjoy teasing her with information. But once she was able to contact Equius again, they switched off their radios and started to use another method of communication. It took her quite some time to find the correct frequencies to even listen in.

She was mildly curious as to how a terrorist group obtained such technology. But that was going to have to wait, she had to help rescue the hostages when Zahhak alerted her to the building's impending doom.

For the first time in years, she worked directly alongside Officer Captor and they had to talk to each other. He always avoided her. He despised her. She wished he wouldn't.

She was still Aradia...

Wasn't she?

Over time, she could see outside of the green liquid that she was floating in. She could see her savior.

Tavros Nitram.

She loved it when he would come and visit her. They loved talking with each other...well, him talking, her communicating using a specially built keyboard inside the tank she could use her powers to manipulate.

But still, they loved talking to each other. He would spend hours down there with her. He told her about what had happened since that horrible day nearly 5 years earlier. He told her how everyone but him had given up hope on her and had built a robotic shell that they copied her soul into.

He told her about how Sollux had forgotten about her and moved on to another woman.

He told her about how the police were woring with that horrible mechanical monstrosity.

He told her about who was responsible for her near-death.

She was not okay with all that was going on. She was not okay with it at all.

...Now...

Officer Megido was feeling 'weird'. It was the best way she could describe it.

She found herself wanting to smile whenever she spoke with her fellow police officers and citizens she helped out on patrol. She would have if her face could move.

She wanted to cry while watching sad movies that she put on during her nightly shut-downs.

She wanted to laugh whenever she heard the others joking.

She wanted to blush whenever Sergeant Equius would smile nervously at her. She wanted to get to know him better.

She wanted to do so much.

She needed to talk to someone.

She needed an upgrade.

She heard everyone in the lab leave in a hurry when the alarms sounded.

What was going on? The alarms were quickly silenced and it was nothing but darkness and quiet.

Then she could hear thunderous echoes from somewhere else. Creaking metal reverberated through her fluid-filled tube.

Something was wrong.

Then the doorway to the lab in which she resided opened. Someone entered.

Two people, no three. One person was holding a smaller person.

She could barely make them out.

Then they walked closer.

She didn't recognize the man who put his hand on her tank.

But she recognized the woman.

That bitch was going to die.

"Disentangled, Part 3" by Wigmund

"No...ple8se no...I-I'm sorry...ple8se don't," Vriska begged as she backed into the corridor, trying to shield her daughter from the source of her terror.

"Y0u're s0rry? S0rry?" The woman leaned back in the air and cackled. The air glowed around her.

John stood confused in the middle of the room, looking back and forth between Vriska and the floating woman.

"Vriska? What's going on? Who is this? She looks like-"

"Aradia?"

Vriska curled around her daughter, terrified beyond comprehension.

"Yeah. Who are you?"

The cruel smile slimmed into a smirk, "Isn't it Obvi0us y0u f00lish idi0t?"

"I am Aradia Megid0."

She then pointed at Vriska and glared at John. Her eyes twitched with rage.

"And I was murdered by that bitch."

John turned to look at Vriska, she was staring at them in terror. Cerulean tears streamed from her remaining eye. She clutched Portia to her chest, shielding the crying girl's body with her own in case Aradia came for her. She sobbed, "I'm sorry Aradia...I'm sorry...ple8se don't...I didn't me8n for th8t to h8ppen..."

"I know of your history as the Marquise, Vriska. I know what your pirates have done. I know what they did to Aradia."

Vriska stopped breathing. He walked up to her and he brushed back Vriska's hair so he could look into her eye.

"But, I'm not here to judge you. That can wait. We're here to save your daughter."

He smiled at her, a weak smile spread across Vriska's face.

Aradia screamed with rage behind them, "D0n't y0u dare ign0re me!"

"I'm not ignoring you, I was just reassuring Vriska that I won't let you kill her.

It's a hero thing. I'm a hero."

"N0, what y0u are is dead!"

Aradia pointed at John and a reddish blast erupted at him. He braced himself and absorbed the blast.

Holy shit that hurt.

"Gonna have to do better than that!" He turned back towards Vriska, "RUN!"

Vriska got to her feet and started running down the corridor towards the emergency exit. Aradia started to fly after her, but was stopped when John rammed her and sent her back into the machinery.

"Sorry, this fight is between us. Superpowers versus superpowers. You need to get through me to get at Vriska."

Laughter erupted from the pile of metal as bits of it floated into the air, suspended by the red haze of Aradia's telekinesis.

"H0w sweet, she's g0t herself a guardian angel. Did she manipulate y0u int0 this?"

"No, this is all of my own free will."

"Hmm, I believe there's s0mething else as well."

John blushed. Aradia's fists clenched and she smiled at John.

"I'm g0ing t0 enj0y this."

Vriska ran down the corridor, trying to not lose her grip on Portia. She tried not to cry as she reassured her daughter that everything would be alright.

"Ple8se 8a8y, don't cry. 8e a 8ig girl for Mommy."

"i'M SC8RED mOMMY! wHERE'S dADDY?" Portia wailed in terror.

Vriska gritted her teeth and ran harder as thunder echoed behind her as John and Aradia fought each other.

She nearly spun out and stumbled when the speakers cracked to life and a horrifyingly familiar voice emerged from them. Portia looked up and squealed, "d8DDY!"

"Indeed it is my, uh, little angel. It's Daddy."

Vriska started to run again, but the sound of Tavros' voice followed her.

"Umm, are you really trying to, uh, run away from me, my love?"

"I'm not your fucking love you piece of shit!"

"Goodness, could you please, um, watch your language around our daughter?"

Irregardless, from your current position, I take it you have run across the surprise I had waiting for you."

"Wh8t? Wh8t are you t8lking a8out?"

"I have, uh, been waiting for this moment for years Vriska. It was why I employed that consort to control my urges. It was why I gave you that beautiful engagement ring."

"You me8n ensl8ving ring!"

"Whatever, but I assume you enjoyed your surprise."

"SURPRISE?! YOU C8LL TH8T A SURPRISE YOU FUCKING MONSTER!?"

"In fact, uh, I do."

Vriska bit her tongue as she continued to run down the corridor as Tavros explained to her what he had done after Aradia's 'death'. He told her how he spirited away Aradia's unconscious body after her mind was copied into the horrible robotic form that Dr. Zahhak had designed. He enjoyed killing that scientist for that abomination. Tavros then told her how he had his researchers design the healing chamber based on a ectobiology lab they found underneath the Lost District and used that to restore his lost love's body to health. It took years, but eventually she was well enough to emerge, but he held back so she could meet her killer face to face...and then kill the Marquise with her own hands.

"You are a monster Tavros!"

"So are you, uh, so are you."

Vriska's eye clouded and she bit her lower lip, "I know..."

"And right now, you, uh, have greater concerns," and with that, the speakers went silent. There was a loud crashing noise and John was propelled through the wall in front of Vriska into the other side, where he dented the metal paneling.

Aradia took a step through the hole and walked up to the prone superhero. She picked

him up by the neck and looked at Vriska.

"Ah, there y0u are. I heard my l0ve speaking t0 y0u."

"You don't w8nt to do this Aradia! Ple8se, don't. I'm sorry for wh8t h8ppened. I deserve to die, 8ut not in front of my 8a8y..."

Aradia dropped John and looked into Vriska's eye.

"Y0u think y0ur pirates granted me any mercy after they sh0t me in the chest?

D0 y0u think they were merciful as they beat and stabbed me?"

Vriska looked away and clutched her daughter.

"Then why d0 y0u think I'd sh0w Y0U any mercy?"

Aradia reached down to grab Vriska's face, but her hand was whisked away with a gust of air that blew back Vriska's hair.

She opened her eye and looked around to see that John was up and had his hammer out. He was breathing heavily as blood coursed down his face.

"You stay the fuck away from her you bitch!"

Vriska turned and saw that Aradia had been slammed into the walls further down the corridor and was out. John walked up to Vriska, still keeping an eye on the prone body. He reached down and helped her up.

"I bought us some time, let's go."

Together the two ran down the halls, towards freedom. Eventually they reached the exit and Vriska gasped in terror at what she saw arrayed in the cavern in front of them.

Her pirates. All of them.

Crucified.

Tavros had them all murdered.

Why?

Vriska covered her daughter's face with her hair and she had John led her through the cave along the path lined with the bodies of her loyal followers. She closed her eye and wept in sorrow.

Tavros had destroyed everything she had. All she had left was her life and her daughter. She felt John reach around her shoulders and pull her in close.

"It'll be alright Vriska. You and Portia are alive. We'll help you. I swear that."

Vriska sobbed as he tried to reassure her. Eventually, she felt the sea's breeze on her face and she opened her eye to take in the view from the cliff base below Nitram Manor. She could see across the waters and see the warning beacons that lined the waters around the Lost District and to the south, the lights of The Narrows. She leaned against John in relief.

If she had looked up at his face, she would have seen him blush from his head to his toes.

"Shall we fly back to the base?"

Vriska nodded at John and shifted Portia so she had a better grip on her girl. John lifted her in a way so that she cradled Portia with her body and remaining arm. John gently lifted off and they slowly made their way across the city.

By time they reached the SEER base, Portia was asleep and John and Vriska had taken up the hour or so of travel time to chat with each other. He spent most of the time reassuring her that everything would be alright, while she told him about all the horrible things she had done, berating herself. He didn't care, he just kept talking about redemption.

Redemption?

Vriska Serket didn't deserve redemption.

But John believed she did.

They arrived at the SEER Base only to find the main hall crowded. Don Strider and his mafia, CrowBro, SpaceLass, The Magpie, Rose and Kanaya were all waiting for the two to arrive.

Don crossed his arms and glared at John, "Brought her back I see, I was hoping you drop her and that damned monster spawn of hers in the bay again."

"Shut the fuck up Dave."

Everyone's eyes widened. John didn't talk back to people like that.

John placed Vriska down gingerly and stood in front of her.

"John, Vriska's done horrible things as the Marquise Spinneret and as Vriska Serket."

"Yeah?"

"Her actions have led to the deaths of hundreds across the city. She allied with Mr. Pupa-"

"Only because he blackmailed her into working with him. He had some damned plot to revive Aradia and use her to kill Vriska."

Everyone stopped and stared at John.

"What Was That?"

"Mr. Pupa had Aradia in his basement. He revived her and was going to let her kill Vriska. I don't know all the details considering he was telling her about that while Aradia was pounding my head through metal walls with her powers."

Rose walked up to them and looked at Vriska, who was cradling Portia and had her eyes closed, expecting the next thing she heard to be the swish of a blade taking away her life.

"Is he telling the truth Vriska? Is what John said about Aradia's revival true?"

Vriska looked at Rose and just nodded her head.

"I want to help Vriska, Rose. She just needs help. Ask Kanaya, Vriska's had a terrible life. If someone actually helped her, she might change."

"John, that's horribly optimistic and a bit unrealistic."

"I know, but we've got to do something for her. I mean, Mr. Pupa did horrible things to her over the past three years. Her life has been little more than one miserable incident

after another. We have to give her a chance, I want to give her a chance."
Vriska was crying again. So was John.

Rose walked up to her step-brother and looked into his eyes. That told her everything she wanted to know.

"Alright, we'll do that John. We'll help Vriska."

CrowBro and Don Strider both yelled, "WHAT!?"

Space Lass just leaned into Don and tried to calm him down, The Magpie pulled her helmet off and slammed it into the ground before storming off. Rose looked at the angry crowd and motioned them to move on. The room emptied of everyone except Rose, John, Vriska and Kanaya.

"Vriska, are you seeking redemption?"

Vriska nodded her head and clutched her daughter who was thankfully still asleep.

"Alright, if we help you, you must agree to certain things. First, you head back to work at the APD."

"They'll never accept me back!"

"They will if I tell them you did everything while under the mental domination of Mr. Pupa and show them the ring he gave you.

Second, you will meet with Kanaya and myself weekly for psychological treatment of your many, many mental issues."

"I don't h8ve anything wrong with my-" Vriska stopped herself and then nodded in agreement.

"Anything else?"

"I'll probably think of something later. But right now you and your daughter need to get some rest. The medical room is waiting for you, Kanaya will guide you."

The trolls left the room, leaving John and Rose alone together.

She turned to face him, he smiled at her. She slapped him. Hard.

"I have no idea what the fuck you were thinking John, but I..."

Rose stopped and hugged herself as he rubbed his cheek.

"...I want to tell you how proud I am of you. You stood up for someone. You stood up for what was right despite the rest of us. I, I'm sorry John."

"Hey, it's alright. I probably deserved the slap anyways for acting so stupidly recently."

"No John, you're acting just like I'd expect you to considering the circumstances."

She kissed him on the cheek and started to head off towards the medical room. John rubbed his cheek and then stopped.

"Wait, what circumstances?"

Back at Nitram Manor, Tavros kneeled next to his bed where Aradia laid. He held her hand and stroked her hair. She opened her eyes, looked at him and smiled. She squeezed his hand.

"My angel awakens. It is good to see you my love."

"It's g00d t0 finally meet the One pers0n wh0 matters in my life."

"I'm sorry you went through all of that Aradia. I'm sorry."

"It's alright Tavr0s. It's g00d t0 be able t0 m0ve again. I can't thank y0u en0ugh f0r

bringing me back when every0ne else gave up 0n me."

Aradia propped herself up and hugged Tavros. She quietly sobbed on his shoulder. Tavros hugged her and smiled to himself. Everything was going perfectly.

He helped her up and led her through his mansion and down into the sea caves below it.

"I have a, uh, surprise for you my dear."

"What is it?"

"Y0u kn0w h0w y0u used t0 tell me ab0ut h0w y0u always wanted t0 be a pirate?"

Aradia giggled, "Yes."

"Well, now you can be one."

He waved into the cave below them and Aradia looked down upon the former Mindfang fleet...now her own fleet.

"Y0u can't be seri0us Tavr0s! I can't be a pirate!"

"Why not?"

"Because...because that w0uld be wr0ng..."

"Why would it be, uh, my love? Because the city that turned its back on you said it was?"

Aradia looked down at the ships and their new crews sternly.

"Why should you care about those who abandoned you. Why should you listen to those who tore your soul apart and jammed part of it inside a cold metal shell?"

Tavros gripped Aradia's shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"Why shouldn't you take your vengeance upon them all?"

Aradia smiled at him and they kissed. They looked down at the ships as they held each other.

"I'll d0 it. We'll make them pay."

She smiled.

"We'll make them all pay."

"Apiculture" by Wigmund

Sollux Captor, officer of the Alternia City Police Department, sat on the roof parapet of the building that housed his tiny apartment, watching the two buzzing hives that were his pride and joy. And the only reason he kept living here despite being able to afford slightly better. He loved his bees, it was the next best thing to being able to keep an actual garden. Not that one could do that in Alternia City without being outrageously rich or having inherited a house that was once on the outskirts of the city and now was enclosed by it, like where he grew up in the Settlements.

He turned around and looked across the city, not very far, but he could see the area of the Settlements he came from. In fact, he could pick out the large oak that dominated the backyard of his mother's house. He smiled, he always hoped his bees were the ones helping her gardens grow. He loved to go back whenever he could and help her plant flowers and pull weeds. She always liked it when her little Honeybee came back home. She was so proud of the man he had grown into, despite him feeling embarassed whenever he compared himself to the success of his six other siblings. They were all teachers, business leaders, or something similar...and they all had their own families.

...15 years ago, about 1 month after the Disaster...

Sollux picked at the bandages that covered his eyes following that disaster. He could see, but the doctors wanted to keep his eyes protected until they could figure out what happened to them.

He could tell them that, they went from mustard yellow to being red and blue. It was weird, but he could deal with it...except for the odd tint he saw everything in now. It was like those cheap 3D glasses he once got from some comic book. It made him feel ill whenever he moved too fast.

"Mama? Can II remove thethe thtupiid bandageth? II can thee jutht fine."

"2ollux, iif you touch tho2e wrap2 again, II'm goiing to have Doctor 2cratch 2tiitch your arm2 to your 2iide2."

"But Mama!"

The woman walked up to her youngest son who was sullenly sitting at the kitchen table, trying to glare at the wall despite the wraps covering most of his head. She kneeled down next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

"II know Honeybee, II know you can 2tiill 2ee. But the doctor2 want to make 2ure nothiing el2e ii2 goiing to happen wiith your eye2."

"...they make me a freak don't they..."

"Don't 2ay that! Ye2 they make you diifferent, but who giive2 a fuck what tho2e a22hole2 2ay."

Sollux started to giggle, he always found it funny when his mother started cursing. She usually watched her mouth around her children, but they all knew when she was being serious or was really angry, then she used her entire vocabulary. He stopped giggling when she embraced him and whispered into his ear, he could feel her tears against his forehead...he upset her...

"Never let what tho2e a22hole2 2ay get to you my beloved 2on. The only per2on'2 opiiniion that matter2 ii2 your own."

There was a knock at the door. His mother got up and went to answer it.

"Oh hey there, are you here to 2ee 2ollux?"

He could hear two sets of footsteps coming towards him. One was his mother's, the other was from someone much smaller.

"2ollux, iit'2 the giirl who told u2 you had fallen iinto the ro2ebu2he2 out2iide."

"Hi there, S0llux. My name is Aradia Megid0. It's nice t0 finally meet y0u."

Sollux blushed. He could hear his mother started to giggle. Aradia gasped and, from the way his mother's giggling turned into outright laughter, she must have been blushing as well.

...11 years ago...

Sollux did not enjoy his teenage years. While most boys only had hormones to worry about, he had explosive eyes to deal with as well. Not to mention nearly uncontrollable telekinesis and odd voices telling him he was doomed and worthless. That wasn't good for any teenage boy to deal with. They had enough shit going on in their head.

Some days it would be so bad that he wished he could just close his eyes, fire those red and blue beams and make his head explode.

But then she would show up and help him. She was always there when ever it felt like he was going to give up.

"I'm here S0llux, d0n't w0rry. I'm here."

She would hold onto him and do her best to comfort him while his tears flowed from the pain. She had her own problems since the disaster, she could hear voices as well and developed telekinesis like he had, except it was weaker.

"D0n't cry, S0llux. It will get better, trust me, it will get better."

He loved her so much. His mother liked her as well.

He reached up to her hands and clutched them.

...8 years ago...

Graduation couldn't come early enough. Sollux and Aradia were so excited, they had already been accepted into the police academy. They just needed to get through high school.

Despite being so far from each other in the role call, they immediately gravitated towards each other as soon as the ceremony was over. Sollux took Aradia's hand in his own. His mother and her parents beamed at them. Someone else was there as well.

"uMM, hELLO THERE. i ASSUME YOU ARE sOLLUX?"

Sollux turned around and found himself looking down at a wheelchair-bound troll with massive horns.

"i, uH, aM tAVROS nITRAM. aRADIA HAS BEEN HELPING ME WHILE HER PARENTS SORT OUT MY INHERITANCE ISSUES."

Sollux's eyebrows raised and he looked at Aradia who was beaming at the cripple, Sollux started to become sullen, but she hugged him while she talked to Tavros.

"Y0u made it Tavr0s! I'm s0 happy t0 see y0u here!"

She took Sollux's hands and looked directly into his red and blue shades that he wore to counteract the tinting effect of his eyes.

"Yes, this is Tavr0s Nitram. My parents are handling his legal issues and I've v0lunteered thr0ugh the h0spital t0 help him with his rec0very after his parents were murdered."

Tavros smiled at the girl, it was obvious that Sollux wasn't the only one who had fallen for the happy maroon-blooded girl.

"Tavr0s, this is S0llux. He's my b0yfriend and we're g0ing t0 enter the p0lice academy t0gether."

Tavros' smile faded from his eyes, but remained elsewhere on his face.

"i AM SO HAPPY FOR YOU TWO, uH, gOOD LUCK mR. cAPTOR. tREAT aRADIA WELL. yOU DON'T KNOW HOW LUCKY YOU ARE."

Less than a year later, he would meet Tavros again at their graduation from the academy. The same sorrow was in Tavros' eyes every time he looked at Aradia. Sollux felt sorry for him.

"S0llux! We did it! We're g0ing t0 be c0ps just like y0ur father was!"

They embraced each other, but were interrupted when his mother walked up to them.

Her eyes were full of tears and her voice cracked a couple of times as she talked to them, "II'm 2oooo proud of you two. 2ollux, iif your father wa2 2tiill here, he'd tell you the 2ame..."

She grabbed them both and hugged them at the same time, her head in between theirs.

"Ju2t keep each other 2afe. Keep each other 2afe."

...5 years ago...

Keep each other safe...

Those words echoed in Sollux's head as he sat next to the hospital bed. He reached up and touched the unresponsive hand of the woman he loved.

He failed her. They had been investigating reports of piracy in Dockside when they were ambushed. They got split up and something happened.

Sollux found Aradia an hour later. Laying in a pool of her own blood, barely alive. Tears streaked down his face as he held onto her hand and wished that she would wake up.

But the doctors had told him that she was never going to. The damage inflicted by the pirates was too much. It was a miracle that she was still alive.

Some miracle.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small box.

He opened it up and looked at the diamond ring inside.

He was going to propose to her next week on her birthday.

He put away the box, curled up in the chair next to her bed and fell asleep.

He would sleep there every day until his family and fellow police officers came and dragged him off kicking and screaming a month later. It was for his own good, he had stopped going to work, stopped eating, stopped talking to anyone. He just sat there next to her bed. He hated them so much for that.

...4 years ago...

"Officer Sollux Captor, meet your new squad partner, Officer Terezi Pyrope. She's been reassigned here."

Sollux looked up from Commissioner Armstrong Righteous and looked at his new partner. She was a troll, a bit shorter than he was, had a huge shit-eating grin, red shades and ...a cane?...

"What'th wiith the cane?"

"I'm bl1nd...h3h3h3..."

Sollux stood up and looked down at the commissioner.

"What the hell iith thiith about? Partneriing me up wiith a bliind cop? Are you-"

"Insane? No, she's the best investigator I've ever seen in my years with the APD.

Problem is, she's a loose cannon and needs to be reigned in. You're going to be those reigns Officer Captor."

"G1ddy-up Off1c3r 4ppl3b3rry."

Sollux looked at her, she meet his gaze perfectly. What the hell?

"As you can see, she has a way of dealing with her blindness. She tastes and smells colors."

"I r34lly lov3 r3d."

"And you've got a red eye, perfect. Now, you two are dismissed. Have fun getting to know one another."

Commissioner Righteous waved them out of his office as he went back to his paper work.

"I th1nk w3'r3 go1ng to g3t 4long f4mously Sollux..."

...3 years ago...

The entire police department had gathered together to meet their newest officer.

Everyone was trying to figure out who it was. Sollux really didn't care, he just wanted to get through this meeting and get back to work. Some new asshole had shown up in the city and was tearing the underworld a new one, everyone feared this 'Mr. Pupa'.

Sollux was busy bullshitting with Terezi when the Commissioner walked in and began to speak, he droned on for awhile about how great it was that they were receiving this new officer...yadda...yadda...yadda..."and now I am proud to introduce, the newest member of DOOF, Officer Aradia Megido!"

Sollux froze as he watched a robot, a fucking robot, that looked just like Aradia walk into the room. She looked at the crowd and bowed her head towards them.

"I am pleased t0 meet y0u all again."

Sollux clenched his legs until he could feel pain and his pants started to get wet. Terezi looked down and put a hand upon on his and tried to pry them loose.

"Sollux, you'r3 bl33d1ng. Stop cl4w1ng yours3lf!"

Sollux could do nothing but stare at the abomination at the front of the room. The emotionless abomination.

"That'th not fuckiing Aradiia."

He got up and left the meeting hall. No one questioned his reasons, they just parted ways to let him out. He exited the police station and used his powers to fly to the hospital as quickly as possible.

"II need two thee Aradiia Megiido."

"I'm sorry sir, she left the hospital yesterday."

"What?!"

"Dr. Zahhak transferred her mind into a cybernetic shell."

"That'th not ARADIIA! That'th jutht a puppet! NOW LET ME GO THEE ARADIIA!"

"Sir, calm down. That robot IS Aradia. The doctors pulled the plug on her body as soon as the transfer was complete."

Sollux couldn't say anything, his stomach dropped and his knees threatened to go out from underneath himself.

"Her family wanted to give it a private dignified burial...I'm sorry sir..."

He turned around and left the hospital. He flew back to his apartment and drank himself into a stupor while looking in a photo album of memories from the 10 years he and Aradia spent together.

...2 year ago...

He hated his job. He hated this city. He was only happy whenever he was with his bees or with his mother.

She could see the pain he was in, but said nothing. She never did, she just hoped her baby boy would snap out of it.

He reluctantly accepted the call to investigate a break-in at some museum.

He never expected what he found there.

...1 year ago...

He found himself enjoying the game of cat and mouse with the CuttlefishCuller. It made him feel alive. It made him feel so much better when they'd find each other and they'd just sit there and talk for hours before Terezi would alert them that the other cops were getting suspicious.

He just hated it that he'd never see her at any other time. Occasionally, official mayoral business would bring her to the police station and the two wouldn't be able to say anything to each other.

They couldn't let everyone know such a powerful and respected woman had fallen for such a commoner. It didn't happen. The High Houses would demand that she be stripped of her position and her own family would probably kill her.

So they kept their love secret, from others and from themselves.

...4 months ago...

Sollux couldn't believe how close he had come to losing her. Feferi nearly died at the hands of that psychotic consort. He'd never let anything like that happen to her again. He'd find a way to protect her.

He'd also find a way to express his love for her. It didn't take a genius to know that most of his fellow police officers had figured out what was going on between them. The dolls they would leave on his desk dressed up like the Culler with a violet and mustard colored heart in her tentacles should have let him know that the cops would unite for one of their own. Especially when he had such a hot girlfriend that would dress up and roleplay with him. They enjoyed miming what they believed happened on each case he had involving the Culler.

Sollux wanted to blast them when they did that. Nothing like that ever happened. He couldn't bring himself to go too far with Feferi...he was too afraid to...

...Now...

Sollux shook his head and snapped himself from the daydream that had preoccupied him. He turned back to his bees and noticed that several wasps were sneaking up on the nest. Looking for prey.

He blasted them with well-focused eye beams and went back to staring at the swarm, but was interrupted when the police radio had placed up on the rooftop buzzed to life.

"We've got a break-in reported in the Settlement..." he listened to the address given and he went cold.

No.

That was...that was his mother's address, that was his home. Someone was violating his retreat.

Sollux bolted to the radio and picked up the transmitter.

"**Thiith iith Offiither Thollukth Captor, I've got thiith covered!**"

"But you're off duty today!"

"**Report me later, I've got thiith!**"

Sollux dropped the comm and flew as fast as he could to his mother's place.

He landed in the back garden and burst through the open back door to find his mother and the CuttlefishCuller sitting at the dining room table. Three cups of warm tea were

sitting out. The two women looked at him and smiled.

"Ah, there you are my Honeybee. I believe we've got something to talk about."

"Motherly Advice" by Wigmund

Sollux couldn't believe what he was seeing in his mother's living room.

There was his mother...and The CuttlefishCuller...and three cups of tea sitting out...

Oh fuck.

"Ah, there you are my Honeybee. II beliieve we've got 2omethiing to talk about," Mrs. Captor motioned to the empty seat in between herself and Feferi.

"Uh...what'th happeniing here?" Sollux closed the back door and moved up to the seat, but didn't sit down. He just looked back and forth between the two women who were looking up at him, "Why iith thhe here Ma...er...Mother?"

"Mother?" One of Mrs. Captor's eyebrows raised, "2iit your a22 down boy or el2e II'll ju2t beat thii2 wii2dom iinto you."

Sollux's mother stared at him, her gaze unwavering, "Don't think that ju2t becau2e you're a twenty-2iix year old cop that can 2hoot la2er2 out of hii2 eye2 wiill dii2uade me. II'm your mother, Honeybee, II brought you iinto thii2 world whiile 2creamiing and cu22iing, II'll take you out of iit the 2ame way."

Sollux quickly sat down and picked up the cup of tea, Feferi was blushing and trying to not look at either of the Captors, Mrs. Captor just turned back to Feferi and smiled at her.

"2o, II take iit that you are the one they call 'The Cuttlefii2hCuller', am II correct?" Feferi smiled at the woman who just scared the living shit not only out of Sollux, but out of her as well, "Yes Ma'am, I am-"

"Niice co2tume you've got there Mii22 Feferii Peiixes."

Feferi blushed and started to mutter, "II can tell liittle mii22y, mo2t people iin thii2 ciity miight be thiick as cow 2hiit on a cold wiinter'2 day, but II'm not mo2t people."

Mrs. Captor took a sip of her tea and smiled at the two thickies sitting with her, "2o what prompted you to dre22 up a2 a cephalopod and act out the2e 2uperviillaiin fanta2iie2?"

Sollux and Feferi glanced at each other and they both sighed.

"I...I started do t)(is because I developed a crus)(on Sollux and I wanted to find a way to meet up wit)()im."

"How 2weet, do contiinue."

"I first met)(im at a conference w)(ere)(e was providing security. We ran into eac)(ot)(er w)(ile)(e was walking around and we started to talk."

"II ended up lothiing track of tiime...we talked the niight away. Terethhii wath piithhed."

Feferi giggled and Sollux blushed, his mother just gave them both a small knowing smile, "I wanted to meet)(im again, but I'm t)(e mayor's aide and daug)(ter of)(ouse Peixes...t)(ere was no way we could meet up wit)(out causing a scandal for eit)(er of us."

Feferi looked over at Sollux, he took her hand and squeezed it, "Keep goiing giirl, there'2 more to thii2 2tory."

"I decided to adopt a persona t)(at would let me roam t)(e city and find Sollux. So I decided to become The Culler."

"And then thhe broke iintwo the Mutheum of Natural Hiithtory, II wath thent iin two iinvethtiigate. II found her prowliing around the thephalopod ekthiibiit."

"I was wearing suc)(a glubbing stupid version of this costume. I used large pipe cleaners as tentacles!)(e)(e)(e)(e)"

Mrs. Captor just smiled at the two as the reminisced.

"II wath tho fuckiing confuthed about what the hell wath goiing on. Thhe kept droppiing innuendo on me."

"You've alway2 been a liittle thiick dear," another sip of tea.

"T)(en)(e cuffed me. But I escaped from t)(em and slipped the cuffs on)(im w)(ile I kissed)(im."

Mrs. Captor started to laugh, she put down her tea and started to roll in her chair until she couldn't breathe, "That'2 a good talent to have honey! II'm 2ure my liittle Honeybee appreciiate2 that talent 2ome niight2."

Feferi and Sollux glanced at each other and blushed, Mrs. Captor squinted at them both, "2o you haven't gone that far have you? 2ollux, you are a noble 2oul in 2trange tiime2."

One of Feferi's tentacles twitched and jarred something on a table behind her. Mrs. Captor looked at her and arched that eyebrow yet again at her costume.

"Any way you can change out of that? II'd rather not have to clean up broken gla22 becau2e of your nervou2 2pa2m2 giirl."

Feferi blushed, "I could...but..."

"The bathroom'2 down the hall, 2econd door on the riight. A2 much a2 2ollux miight enjoy iit, II'm not goiing to make you change iin front of hiim."

Feferi got up and excused herself and then disappeared down the hall. Mrs. Captor turned to her son and sighed.

"That mu2eum break-in happened two year2 ago. Why diidn't you tell me you met a new giirl?"

"II...II wath hethitant...II wath afraiid..."

Mrs. Captor moved to the couch and had Sollux come sit next to her, "You're afraiid that you could lo2e her liike you lo2t Aradiia."

Sollux just nodded and wiped away the mustard tears that started to stream from underneath his shades. They heard a gasp and looked up to see Feferi in a sundress, her hand was over her mouth, purple tears were forming in her eyes.

"I...I'm sorry Sollux...I never knew t)(at you two were toget)(er..."

"Iit'th alriight FF...That wath yearth ago..."

Sollux got up and took Feferi's hands, "Thiinthe then, II met you and II've never been happiier...II..."

"Ju2t 2piit iit out boy."

"II love you Feferii."

"I love you too Fis)(sticks."

"Now iif you two would ju2t admiit iit iin publiic."

The two lovers turned around to face Mrs. Captor who had gotten up from the couch and moved up to them, she placed her arms around them, drawing them in close to her.

"Bu-but Mrs. Captor...(e)(ig)()(ou-"

"Fuck tho2e iinbred twiit2 giirl. The only people'2 opiiniion you 2hould care about ii2 your own and 2ollux'2."

"But-"

"Don't you 2tart up eiither. You two need to ju2t head out there and admiit your love. Ye2, 2ome wiill complaiin, but tho2e people are piiece2 of fuckiing 2hiit and don't fuckiing matter."

Sollux and Feferi looked at each other, smiled and embraced.

"That'2 better."

The two began to kiss, Mrs. Captor just smiled at them, "Next thiing II want two talk about ii2 when can II expect grandkiid2 from you Honeybee?"

Sollux's eyes bulged and he pulled away from Feferi, coughing, "Wh-wh-what?!"

"[color=ff9933"]Grandkiid2. The re2t of your 2iibling2 have giiven me liittle bundle2 of joy to 2poiil. Even you're baby 2i2ter. You're the la2t one.[/color]"

Feferi just stood there in stunned silence, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Mrs. Captor looked at her and beamed a huge shit-eating grin.

"Don't worry Feferii, you don't need to ru2h. II ju2t 2aiid that to get 2ollux'2 goat."

She hugged the two again, "II just want you two to bee happy. Now II've got to get 2ome 2tuff done around here, 2o you two need to 2kedaddle ."

She chased the two out the front door and watched them walk away hand-in-hand, Mrs. Captor smiled and walked back inside her house. She sat down on the couch and picked up her phone.

"So, how d1d 1t go?"

"Perfectly, maybe now they'll stop all that coy bull2hiit and ju2t admiit theiir love to everyone."

"H3H3H3H3, 1 k1nd4 doubt 1t, but w3 c4n hop3. C4n't w3 Mrs. C4ptor?"

"II've told you Terezii, you can call me Mama. Anyone who help2 my 2on ii2 famiily to me."

"W3ll th3n M4m4, do you w4nt to h1t up th3 Cod Pl4c3? 1 h34r th3y'v3 4rr4ng3d 4noth3r f1ght b3tw33n N3p3t4 4nd th3 M4gp13."

"Of cour2e, II'm alway2 up for a good driink."

And with that, the two conspirators laughed.

"The Zoo" by Wigmund

Waking up because you can feel something or someone staring intently at you is a phenomenon well known by pet owners and parents with small children.

Karkat had gotten so used to this sensation over the 15 years he had known Nepeta that he could A) tell if it was she was the one staring at him and B) completely ignore the sensation if it was her. Problem with (B) was that it usually required her to be some distance away from him. So when he felt the Stare coming from mere inches away from his face he awoke to find himself staring into two large green-tinted yellow eyes.

Nepeta was laying on top of Karkat, looking intently into his eyes with a mischievous smirk on her face.

"Good morning Nepeta...you need something?" Karkat tried to rub the sleep from his eyes, but found his arms were pinned under the sheets and Nepeta.

She purred at him and rested her chin on his chest, ";33 < Purrhaps..."

"Perhaps what? You know I don't like playing these little games of yours when I first wake up."

Nepeta frowned at him and then reached up and started fiddling with one of his horns...ohhhh...my...that... Karkat's eyes started to roll back in his head and a goofy grin crossed his face. Then he shook his head to knock her hand away from his nubs and glared at her.

"Uh...Dammit...Just tell me what you fucking want Nepeta," He tried to grimace at her, but her hand went back to fiddling with his horn.

":33 < *The lioness just wants to make sure her mate will keep his purromise about taking her to the Zoo today*"

Karkat slammed his head back into the pillow and sighed, "Yes Nepeta, we're going today. You seem to be feeling much better. Have you checked the weather?"

":DD < The news said it was going to be a purrfect day for a date."

"Alright, alright, let me get up and get ready and we'll head out," Karkat rolled over and tossed Nepeta off of his covers and got up. He booted her from his room and started to take a shower.

He suddenly stopped while sudsing his hair, "HER MATE? A DATE?!"

Karkat got dressed and entered the apartment's living room, "What did you mean by date Nepeta?"

">:II < Exactly what I said, a date, you and me at the zoo all day."

"Isn't Gamzee coming with us?" Karkat motioned to the stoner who was currently half-awake on the couch watch children's educational program and giggling whenever the experience got really intense.

">;33 < Nope, Gamzee's got other plans today." Gamzee looked over at Karkat and Nepeta, smiled and waved at them.

"YeAh, SoRrY bRo. I'vE gOt SoMe HuGe FuCkInG pLaNs AnD sHiT tO dEaL wItH tOdAy. So I'm GoNnA hAvE tO bAiL oN tHe FiELd tRiP."

"But....but..." Karkat sputtered as he looked at his best friend. Other plans? He couldn't do that! That means it would be just...

":33 < You and me at the zoo allll day today, how purrfect," Nepeta leaned on Karkat and gave him her little kitty smile. She then grabbed his hand and dragged him from the apartment.

"butbutbutbut...but..."

Gamzee waved good bye to them, "HaVe A fUcKiNg WoNdErFuL tImE yOu TwO."

When the door was closed and he couldn't hear Karkat's sputtering anymore, Gamzee reached under the couch and pulled out a package. On it was a note.

':33 Some cookies fur you Gamzee, enjoy your day at home while me and Karkitty go to the Zoo. ;33'

He opened it up, "FuCk YeAh! PeAnUt BuTtEr AnD sOpOr-ChIp!"

Nepeta and Karkat boarded the city bus line and started their journey to the zoo.

Nepeta glanced at Karkat, "':?? < Why are we taking the bus when I can turn into a car?"

Karkat shrugged and looked over at her, "I just felt like taking the buses today, wanted to be able to actually talk with you on the way there."

Nepeta frowned, "':((< But I thought you liked driving me around town."

Karkat blushed a bit, "Why are you making that sound suggestive?"

She leaned up against him and purred into his ear, "':33 < I really like it when you honk my horns and drive me hard."

Karkat turned a vibrant shade of red as Nepeta giggled and cuddled up close to him. It was going to be an interesting day.

Eventually, they reached the zoo. Karkat bought their tickets and the two entered hand-in-hand. They spent the entire day there. Going from exhibit to exhibit. Nepeta squealed excitedly whenever they passed by something that was cute or had babies. She really got worked up when they reached the lemurs.

Karkat was still confused by that, she was throwing a bigger fit over those things than she did over the big cats. There, she just slinked along and just occasionally peeked over the railings to see the lions and tigers. She'd always go back to hiding whenever they'd stare at her. Maybe it was a cat thing.

Karkat found himself particularly engrossed in the marine life exhibits where he got into a glaring contest with a tank full of crabs. He swore one of them looked like his asshole father. He focused his hateful gaze on that one in particular only to find it returned back at nearly equal strength.

They were both confused by the exhibit of platypuses...platypi...platypodes? They both couldn't believe that creatures like that existed naturally. Sure, there were plenty of strange things that the ectobiology research labs dropped off in the city's sewers, but these things were real.

As the day ended, Karkat found himself enjoying being with Nepeta. He loved her company, always had, but never quite like this. He found himself actually joking and conversing with her. Something he had never done before. He always treated her like the younger sister he lost so long ago. But now, he started to treat her like the woman

she had grown up to become. A beautiful, charming, yet somewhat crazy, woman.

They ended up walking home across the city, while for most people that would have been a crazy thing to do. Their gang had a reputation that kept most everyone away. They were accosted at one point by some coat-clad loon who shouted about how everything was stupid and all wrong, but they just ignored him and continued along their way home.

Talking and smiling.

Eventually, they made it back to the apartment. Karkat opened the door to find Gamzee passed out on the couch, covered in crumbs. He walked up to the couch and picked up the wrapping and the note. He looked over at Nepeta, "You planned all of this didn't you?"

Nepeta blushed and looked away from Karkat, her worried eyes darting around the room, but never settling on him. He walked up to her and held the note from her to Gamzee in front of himself.

"You planned on today just being the two of us together didn't you?"

":((< Maybe...I...I'm-

She was cut off when Karkat reached up behind her head, pulled her down to his level and kissed her.

Nepeta froze and her tail curled upon itself.

Eventually Karkat pulled out of the kiss, leaving Nepeta frozen with puckered lips and a stupid smile on her face.

"Thank you. Now, we've got a busy day tomorrow, so I'm gonna hit the sack. Have a good night Nepeta," Karkat walked into his room and closed the door.

Nepeta straightened up and looked around. Gamzee was still passed out, only now a knowing smile had formed on his badly-painted face, the television was still on public access, but instead of cartoons it was showing old British and Troll comedies. Nepeta turned around and walked out the front door, carefully closing it behind her.

She made her way up the stairs and onto the rooftop.

She stopped in the middle of the roof and stared up into the night sky. No stars, only the light-polluted blackness of the city. But Nepeta didn't need to see the stars to know they were there. The stupid smile on her face turned into a face-splitting grin and she jumped into the air.

"XDD < YESSSS!!!!"

"Routine" by Wigmund

5:30am

BEEPBBBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBBBB BEEPBBBBBBBB BBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBBBB BEEP...

Sollux slapped at his alarm clock, trying to shut it off. Where the fuck was that snooze button?

BEEPBBBBBBBBBEEP BEEPBBBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBBBBBEEP...

He kept trying to find the damned button. Why couldn't he find the damned thing?

BBBBBBB BEEPBBBBBEEPBBBB BEEPBBBBBBBBBEEPBBBB BEEP BEEP

BEEPBBBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBBBBBEEP BBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBBBBBEEPBBBBBB-...

The alarm clock briefly glowed red and blue and was flung out of the window. A clatter from the streets below announced its death.

Sollux rolled into a sitting position on his bed. He sighed and scratched himself as he got up and walked into the closet that passed as his bathroom, well the area where his toilet was. His tub was in the main room along with his bed, a small stove and a tiny fridge.

Ah the bachelor life.

Once he relieved himself, he scratched himself yet again and stretched. Damn rock-hard couch-bed.

He then prepared for yet another long routine day at work.

6:00 am

It was great being able to fly. He didn't have to deal with public transit or traffic at all.

He reached the APD Headquarters just as his shift was slated to begin. He walked in from the roof top and clocked in.

He raided the coffee shop someone thankfully convinced Commissioner Righteous to have built in the HQ and picked up his usual breakfast.

Honey buns and a really dark cup of coffee. Ah, the power of sugar and caffeine.

7:30am

Officer Sollux Captor, ever the professional, had propped his feet upon his desk and was fast asleep when his squad partner came into work over an hour late.

No one pitched a fit about her tardiness. She was blind after all.

Officer Terezi Pyrope stopped next to Sollux and glared at him. He responded with a glass-rattling snore. She smacked him on his shins with her cane. He screamed in pain and tumbled from his chair.

"W4k3 up sl33py h34d, c4n't b3 c4ught snooz1ng on th3 job. Wh4t would th3 comm1sh th1nk?" Terezi was wearing her usual shit-eating grin as she took her seat

opposite of Sollux and propped her head upon her hands.

Sollux glared at her, picked up his chair and sat back down, "Thame thiing he doeth about you comiing iinto work over an hour late."

"1 c4n't h3lp th4t! 1'm bl1nd 4nd g3t lost 34s1ly...h3h3h3h3"

"Yeah, lotht iin Thriider'th bed-" Sollux leaned back as Terezi's cane whipped back his face, her smile had only gotten wider. Oh shit, something was up.

"So Hon3yb33," Sollux froze and stared at Terezi, "How w4s your l1ttl3 ch1t-ch4t w1th F3f3r1 4nd your moth3r."

"How, how do you know about..." Sollux pounded his head on the desk, "AARRGGHH!! You thet that whole thiing up diidn't you?"

"4ctu4lly, 1t w4s 4ll M4m4's 1d34. But 1 cont4ct3d F3f to l3t h3r know wh3r3 to go."

"You biitcheth."

"Don't t4lk 4bout your M4m4 th4t w4y."

"I've called her worthe."

"But how d1d 1t go?" Terezi smiled at Sollux, her eyebrows arched in genuine curiosity.

"Not fuckiing telliing you, you meddlethome meddler."

Terezi pouted her bottom lip at Sollux, but he was already starting on today's paperwork.

9:00am

After what felt like an entire day, Sollux finished his own paperwork and then redid Terezi's.

Damn her habit of constantly changing pen colors and doodling crappy comics about what happened in the margins.

Once he was done with that, they reported to the front desk.

No patrols today. Today was their lucky day.

They got to deal with the crazy fucks who voluntarily entered the HQ looking for help or looking to cause some shit.

10:25am

"Jutht head back to the thellth, we'll contact the mental ward and they'll thend thomeone to come pick you up."

"BUT IT'S ALL WRONG! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE BLIND!"

"Well that'th a new one. Jutht head back to your uthual thell Andrew we've got your favorite meal waiting for you back there."

"ONE (1) HOT TURKEY PLATTER WITH MASHED POTATOES, GRAVY, STRING BEANS, APPLE SAUCE, AND ONE (1) GLASS OF MILK. MY VITALS WILL SOAR!"

"Yeah, whatever. Have a niithe day."

Sollux waved the crazy hobo in the oversized neon green coat off. Blind? That was a new one.

1:00pm

Lunch time.

Time for some Prospitan stir-fry. Sollux picked up a couple of servings of the stuff and brought it back to the station. He and Terezi gorged themselves at their desks.

She messily slurped up the noodles and mysterious bits of meat and vegetables that made up their meals, spraying soy sauce and drippings everywhere. The paperwork on her desk received yet another coating of filth. Sollux had prepared for this in advance and had stored everything in the desk's drawers.

No one needed paperwork from Terezi. He was the one they went to for that stuff.

He laughed at her as a noodle ended up plastering itself on her red shades and she tried futilely to lick it off with her long tongue.

2:00pm

Back to the front desk.

Sollux propped his head up and stared at the opposite wall. Someone had painted a mural there celebrating the diversity of Alternia City. Trolls, Prospitans, Dersites, Consorts and humans from all of their ethnic groups were there. The participants were all smiling and happily going about their business of being dipshits.

Sollux hated it.

A chorus of yelling awakened Sollux from his reverie and he watched a trio of ruffians being dragged in, kicking and screaming.

"LET ME FUCKING GO YOU GOGDAMNED PIECES OF SHIT! WE HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING TODAY!"

":33 < Can I share a cell with Karkitty?"

Sollux cocked an eyebrow at Nepeta, "Why do you want that?"

She broke free from the grasp of the officers holding her and ran up to the front desk. She crouched down in front of it so the only thing Sollux could see was her large eyes and that cathat peeking above the edge. He could tell she was beaming at him.

";33 < Because he's my boyfriend now."

"Really?"

":DD < Yep, he took me to the zoo yesterday!"

"Ithn't that thweet."

"X33 < Isn't it?!"

"FUCKING HELL NEPETA! DO YOU WANT TO SHARE THAT NEWS WITH THE ENITRE WORLD?"

Nepeta ran back over to Karkat and wrapped her arms around him, giving him a passionate kiss that cause him to turn a vibrant shade of red. Their clown friend giggled and just smiled at them, so did the officers that were hauling them in.

":)) < Isn't it worth sharing Karkat?"

Karkat looked around the room and saw that everyone was staring at them. He shrank down and muttered something underneath his breath. One of the officers holding him gave him a shove, "Speak up man, can't leave a girl hanging."

"GODDAMMIT! YES NEPETA, YES IT IS! Now let's get locked up before I die of embarrassment out here."

2:39pm

"Don't you remember me? I helped you enter the game."

Sollux stared at the troll in front of him. He really hated this guy.

"Man, I sobbed like a little girl when you died and Feferi had to revive you with her kiss of life."

"Head on back, the hobo'th waitiing for you."

"Cool, maybe he'll set everything right."

3:14pm

"Will you behold my robes?"

Sollux got onto the intercom as the ash settled, "Thomeone get the janiitor, we've got another Thecret Wiithard thtaiin iin the lobby."

4:00pm

Sollux had drifted off into another dreamy state where he wasn't paying attention to what was going on in the lobby again. Not that it mattered. The only people out there were some of the usual crazies who were someone else's problem and a janitor trying to remove the blast marks from the floor for the third time this week.

So it wasn't a surprise when Sollux just grunted in response when a familiar woman walked into the station and past the desk.

"Greetings Officer Captor, I'm here to meet with the Commissioner."

"Whatever, have fun."

Sollux waved her and her two female troll companions on.

Something nudged his mind and alerted him to a curious situation. Two troll women?

Sollux turned around, but only caught a glimpse of the trio as they rounded a turn in the corridor that led deeper into the station.

Rose, Kanaya and someone with a shoulder-length bobbed haircut.

It couldn't have been her. She'd never have a hair cut like that. Besides, Vriska wasn't missing an arm.

6:12pm

Sollux stretched as he headed back to his desk after being relieved for the day. He stretched and yawned and looked forward to heading back home once he finished up his and Terezi's paperwork for the day.

He glanced at his partner, she was busy doodling away on her reports.

Goddammit, this was going to take all night.

Sollux was working furiously and mentally somewhere else, so he didn't notice that

every person in the offices had stopped and were staring at something.

He grunted in frustration as he tried to make sense of what Terezi had written. He leaned back to rub his eyes and was surprised to find someone standing behind him.

The fact that Terezi was giggling for the past 15 minutes should have tipped him off that something was going on. But she constantly giggled.

Sollux turned around and froze when he saw that it was Feferi standing behind him.

He hurriedly stood up and backed up into his desk, accidentally sitting down on the reports he was working on.

"Uh, oh, uh hello there Mithh Peiithheth, what briingth you here?"

Sollux nervously glanced around the room and found that everyone was staring at them.

"You know w)(y I'm)(ere Sollux."

"What are you talkiing about?" Toothy grins everywhere now.

"Don't you remember w)(at you're mot)(er said yesterday?"

Sollux froze in terror as more police officers poured into the room as people sent out text messages about what was going on.

"Well, I do and I spent all nig)(t t)(inking about it."

"Tho diid II FF...but what are you doiing here?"

The room was absolutely quiet despite being filled to the ceiling with most every officer that served in the APD. Terezi's giggling had elevated into a full-blown cackle.

Feferi wrapped her arms around Sollux's shoulders and leaned in close to him, "I'm)(ere for t)(is..."

She kissed him.

Passionately.

Sollux's mind screamed in terror as he was acutely aware that every single person in the room started to cheer him on. A cane rapped him on the back of the head and his arms automatically wrapped themselves around Feferi, pulling her in closer to him.

He closed his eyes and took in the incredible scent of irises and sea water that followed Feferi around.

The cheering turned into full-fledged wolf-calls. But Sollux and Feferi ignored them, they were somewhere else.

Sergeant Equius Zahhak and Officer Aradia Megido watched the two in their passionate embrace.

"D--> This...this is outrageously decadent!

D--> A member of the highest noble-b100ded house and a low-b100ded police officer..."

Equius sputtered and sweated as he continued to stare at what was going on. He gasped in shock as Sollux's hands drifted down Feferi's back and squeezed.

"D--> %treme decadence!"

"Oh shut it, Zahhak. They're happy."

Equius paused and looked at Officer Megido. The robot was leaning up against the wall with her arms crossed in front of her. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something seemed different about her composure and tone of voice. He shrugged and went back to watching the two trolls in love make out...he needed a towel.

Sollux opened his eyes and focused on Feferi as she broke away from the kiss. He had a stupid grin on his face. He knew it. But then, she did as well.

They blushed and looked around at everyone as the other officers whooped and hollered at them. They could see money passing between several officers. That damned betting pool.

Sollux sighed, "Tho, diid you want anythiing elthe FF?"

She smiled at him and pecked him on the cheek again, "Well, I was going to say t)(at I've made reservations at t)(e Clockwork Golden for us."

Sollux choked. The Clockwork Golden? Holy shit Feferi, you were taking Mama's speech to heart weren't you?

Apparently Feferi could read what was passing through Sollux's mind because she just nodded her head and embraced him yet again.

Well shit, maybe this wasn't such a routine day after all.

"The Ampora Files" by Wigmund

Eridan Ampora, Private Investigator, woke with a start when the phone rang and tumbled out of his rolling chair. He just barely got up in time to answer the phone on the final ring.

"Eridan Ampora Investigations, this is Mr. Ampora, howw can I help you?"

"Hello Mr. Ampora, this is Petunia...er...[small]Sleuth, What's my last name again[/small]"

Eridan frowned and then slammed the receiver of his phone onto the desktop several times.

"Fuck you assholes, you're just jealous because I actually solvved something last wweek!"

"And you've been lucky to get cases to look for pets eaten by consorts!"

He slammed the phone on it base and got up.

Stretching, he stopped when something in his back ached. He walked over to the small sink that was in the tiny bathroom attached to his office and looked at himself in the mirror.

"Goddammit I look like shit."

He rubbed a hand over his stubbly face and picked at the purple patch on his forehead. He's always had it, but it definitely grew in size after Mr. Pupa put that bullet in his head. He hated it, it made him look like a douche. He splashed some water into his face to help wash the sleep from his eyes.

"Wwell fuck that. I've actually got something to do today don't I?"

Eridan went back to his desk and dug through the mass of bills, legal threats, death threats and junk mail that formed a thick layer of fossilized paper.

"Wwhere the fuckin hell is it?"

"Ah, there wwe go."

He pulled out a worn folder with his latest case in it.

Apparently someone hired him to go look for the Consort Market and location some goods they lost to the thieving bastards.

Normally, no sane person would go looking for that place. But Eridan...

Eridan, he needed to pay the bills or the bank was going to send a collections squad after him.

He shuffled through the paperwork and checked over the details of the case.

"Let's see...some broad, calls about some missing jewelry, says she saww some consorts take it into the sewwers..."

"Fuck."

Eridan slammed down the paperwork and sat down, rubbing his tired, sore eyes. This case sucked.

Only madmen went into the sewers looking for the Consort Market which is where every lead he found in this case lead towards.

God-fuckin-dammit.

Eridan composed himself, grabbed his trench coat and scarf and got ready to leave his office.

He approached the door and noticed a shadow outside.

"Fuckin asshole."

He kicked the door open, knocking over the fucking asshole who was outside it.

Eridan walked outside and looked down at the unconscious Ace Dick who had been scrawling something on his door...
...again.

Eridan closed his door and looked at what the idiot wrote today. Oh that was original he thought, it's only the third time he's changed "Eridan Ampora Investigations" into "Eridan is a wworeass? If you're gonna wwite on my door, use something other than dry-erase markers!"

Eridan turned to unconscious Dick and kicked him in his crotch. Hard.

Let the fucker deal with that when he woke up. Eridan walked to the elevators and past the offices of his rivals, the bastards who took up so much of their time tormenting him.

"Sleuth, Inspector & Dick" or as Eridan had rewritten it with a permanent marker "Sleuth Inspects Your Dick". They still hadn't hired someone to re-do their door.

That gave him a smile, he was doing better than they were right now.

Four hours later, Eridan Ampora was underneath The Narrows, running from a party of angry Crocodile consorts.

Today was going to be great his horoscope said. Fuck that.

"A Healing Touch" by Wigmund

Kanaya Maryam, freelance medical liaison and operator of the one of Alternia City's many free medical clinics, sat in her office and clicked through pictures of the last vacation she and Rose had taken together months ago. She really wished that she had some more time off after all the recent events to unwind.

So much had been going on recently. It was stressful.

And stress was a bad thing.

Kanya reached out for pitcher of viscous fluid and poured it into a goblet. She drank deeply of the fluids and sighed contentedly.

She could feel the urges abating.

Kanaya rubbed her eyes and looked to the ceiling, reflecting upon the events of the past.

...15 years ago, moments after the Green Sun Disaster...

The 9-year old girl hugged her medical supply case as she followed her parents into what had been the densely populated Hiveburg district of Alternia City.

Now all she could see was smoke and ruin and hear the screams and wails of those trapped in the wreckage or from those who had freed themselves and stumbled around looking for help.

She covered her mouth and looked away from the horrible burns and melted faces of the victims. She cried horribly. She didn't want to be her, but she had to, she had to assist her parents with their medical services. They would have been disappointed otherwise.

Kanaya was the one who noticed the two trolls little older than she was stumbling towards the edge of the devastated district. She tugged on her mother's dress and got her attention.

"Mother, Those Two Require Our Assistance!"

Kanaya ran towards the two, but stopped when she saw the wounds the young girl had suffered.

Her...her eyes.

Kanaya covered her mouth as her mother and father pulled the young boy away from the injured girl and placed them onto separate rescue choppers. He screamed and cussed at the Maryams and the rescue crews.

Kanaya and her mother boarded the one the girl was on and helped tend to her wounds. She looked over at the other chopper to see that the young boy who had shown up with the girl was pounding on the windows. The girl on the other hand

reached into the air and muttered something weakly.

Karkat? Was it that boy? Her father?

...10 years ago...

She can't remember when her feelings for Vriska changed from pity to something more. Maybe it was during those long nights they'd spend together when she'd convince her parents to allow the mistreated girl to stay at their place. Vriska would tell Kanaya about the horrible things she went through and how she always hoped everything would improve.

It was so easy to pity her. The only thing that made acting upon that pity difficult was how Vriska would lash out at anyone who got too close to her. But Kanaya fought her way through that defensive field and found the sad, pathetic girl who was hidden deep inside.

She came to love that girl, and she tried to show Vriska that if she would let that girl out.

Pity Kanaya never got to help her do that.

Kanaya had come to also enjoy the company of a girl her own age. It wasn't anything serious like her relationship with Vriska, but her friendship with Rose was just as important.

It became especially important when they made a horrible mistake. They never should have gone into the sewers, there was a reason that city officials told people to not go down there after the Disaster.

Not only were there consorts down there, but there were darker things in the shadowy depths. Things that caused even the military to travel heavily armed down there.

Rose and Kanaya were roleplaying one of their favorite stories down there. What was it? Something about a mutated beast-man who fell in love with a woman on the surface, he (now she) was a gentle soul who ruled over a underground city of the homeless and she (still she) was a powerful district attorney. It was a beautiful story.

Pity their story was ruined when the foul things that lurked in the shadows of Alternia City's sewers found the girls.

Kanaya turned around to find a huge black form looming over her.

There was a horrible pain in her gut.

She could feel the cold of the sewers creep over her.

Her clothes were wet.

Did she fall into the filthy water?

She vaguely remembered flashes of purple light.

Was Rose using a pair of knitting needles?

There were screams of terror, pain and anguish.

Rose was leaning over her, crying.

Then there was a stabbing pain in her gut.

Then it all went black.

When Kanaya came to later, she was covered in purple blood and Rose was holding onto her, crying.

"I'm sorry Kanaya. I didn't mean for this to happen. I'm sorry I'm sorryImsorry..." Rose buried her face in Kanaya's hair.

"What...What Happened Rose? I...I Remember Something Attacking Us In The Sewers...And Then It All Went Black..."

Rose pulled away from the terrified troll girl and looked around them. Kanaya did so as well.

She covered her mouth and tried not to scream as she saw the bodies surrounding them. So much purple blood. It...

It made her hungry...

Kanaya retched horribly and looked in horror at the purple mess that had come out.

"Rose...What Has Happened To Me?"

"I...I am not sure Kanaya, but I will do everything I can to help you..."

Rose took Kanaya's hand and led her away from the scene.

When they had left, a boy crawled out from underneath the trash bags he had hidden under and walked into the middle of the carnage and looked over what was left of his parents and his beloved grandfather.

He fell to his knees and just stared into the distance.

...6 years ago...

Kanaya had come to accept her nature. She learned to avoid people whenever the urges came upon her. Her parents had accepted the news and their changed daughter when Rose and her mother stopped by to explain what had happened.

They would always accept their daughter. They would find ways to help her. It helped they ran a medical clinic. They could supply their daughter with what she needed to control herself.

Kanaya just wish she could find something else to quiet the urges.

Maybe she could discover something to substitute when she entered medical school.

Her parents were so proud of her, Rose as well. Kanaya wanted Rose to join her, but the blonde human told her she had other plans, but she'd keep in touch.

...4 years ago...

Rose did keep her promise.

Over the years, the two had become concerned about the gang wars that were ravaging Alternia City over the artifacts that were activated after the Green Sun Disaster.

They wanted to do something about it. They had to find a way to watch and control those dangerous items. And by working with Rose's mother and an elderly gentlemen, they created an organization that would do just that. They looked all over the city for individuals to recruit into S.E.E.R.

The first recruit was the gentleman's granddaughter, she practically begged to join when they approached her after her grandfather's accident. Then they recruited a man who they found out later was Rose's long-lost twin brother. Their final recruit was Rose's step-brother, John.

Kanaya gritted her teeth at that. But Rose reassured her that John was her step-brother and nothing would come between the two women.

...2 years ago...

Graduation from medical school. Sure, she could have gone further and become a highly-paid doctor, but that isn't what she wanted. She wanted to be able to help people without forcing them to pay ludicrous fees. The training she received over the previous four years were enough to allow her to take over her parent's medical office. They were so proud of her and despite being able to retire, they stayed on to help her run the facility.

Kanaya also found herself accepting a part-time job working with the Alternia City Police Department as a medical officer at their HQ. There she met the two who would become S.E.E.R.'s main allies within the APD, Sollux Captor and Terezi Pyrope, the very girl that she had helped over 13 years earlier. Kanaya didn't remember her, but Terezi did.

Kanaya also had developed something to help control her urges. The cocktail of sopor, animal blood and a concoction of what would be horrifyingly toxic poisons to anyone else duplicated the effects that blood had and it calmed her for a much longer period of time. Thankfully, everything was easy to pick up from convenience stores, butcher shops and the medical facility she ran. It just took her awhile to find the right mixture that she could imbibe and not have to worry about poisoning everyone she touched.

It terrified her that first time she used the concoction and nearly killed Rose when they kissed in celebration.

...Several weeks ago...

Kanaya couldn't believe it when John hauled in the gravely wounded Vriska. But his fierce defense of the woman led Kanaya to defend her as well. She had lost track of Vriska after that accident 10 years ago, she never figured out why she just disappeared. It hurt to saw off Vriska's mangled arm and remove the ruined eye.

Then John and Vriska ran off to rescue her daughter and Kanaya just watched in wonder as he defended her yet again from the gathered forces of S.E.E.R., it was his fervor to help that, yet again, led Kanaya to suggest to Rose that they try and help Vriska. She needed help. Psychological help.

Rose always liked playing psychiatrist. That got her to agree. Now they had to deal with the angry, bitter woman on a weekly basis. Joy.

So when they chipped through her shell a bit, Rose and Kanaya agreed to let the love-stricken puppy that constantly popped up at the base whenever Vriska was around loose. John was simply ecstatic when they suggested that he ask the blue-blooded woman to go see that horrendous movie has was obsessing over with him. When Maggie complained about him dating their enemy they sent her to go babysit Portia so Vriska couldn't use that as an excuse.

...the here and now...

Kanaya rubbed her eyes as she caught up to the present.

She heard footsteps coming up behind her. She spun the chair around and was surprised to see Rose.

"You going to spend all night here Kanaya?"

"Maybe My Dear, It Is Not Like I Actually Require Sleep."

"I know, but you know how working for such extended periods affects your condition. I just worry about you."

Kanaya sighed and got up from her chair. She made sure there was no one in the waiting room and then she shut the facility down for the evening.

Rose locked elbows with Kanaya, "Let's head home. Apparently John's itching to tell us about his date with Vriska."

"Oh Goodness, That Is Something To Look Forward To. You Know How I Just Love To Hear Him Ramble."

"You will when he tells us about how Maggie came to be encased in a cocoon when he and Vriska returned to her place."

"What?"

"My sentiments exactly."

"Oracle" by Wigmund

Rose laughed herself breathless as John told her of Maggie's disastrous attempt at babysitting Vriska's two-year old daughter Portia.

"So wait...wait, where did Portia get the webbing from?"

"I don't know. Maggie wouldn't tell me!" He started giggling again, "Hell, the only reason I know that it was webbing was because I helped Vriska pull the girl out of the cocoon."

Across the main bay of S.E.E.R.'s base, Kanaya was helping Maggie pull residual strands of the silk from her hair and clothing. This was made difficult because the sullen teen refused to remove her bird cap, even threatening to bite Kanaya if she tried to pull it off. Maggie would glare at her aunt and uncle whenever they started laughing again. Rose was enjoying this too much.

Damn the Striders, Dave and his paradox twin Don, for not controlling their daughter - especially after that incident at the Cod Place.

"Okay, okay John. Enough about Maggie's disastrous babysitting escapades, how did your date with Vriska go?"

John blushed and looked away sheepishly. Rose leaned forward and smiled nastily at her step-brother.

"A bit better than you expected?"

John gulped and suddenly got up from the couch he was sitting on, "Oh wow, look at the time. I really need to head home and prepare for classes tomorrow. That PhD isn't gonna just appear on my desk, I gotta study...and go do stuff...elsewhere..."

John started to walk away as Rose laughed at him. She could tell he wasn't hurt by her teasing, just incredibly embarrassed.

Rose stopped and smiled at his back. Hard to believe that they have known each other for...

...15 years ago...

Rose tried to comfort the young boy that her mother and the strange man dropped off on her couch. But she was never one to know how to deal with others. She lived well beyond the outskirts of the city in the Morfuckin Mountains, dealing with people - especially those her own age - was not a skill she had needed before.

But as she watched the boy sob uncontrollably after his father came back and explained to him that his mother was dead, she decided that talking to people and learning to understand their motivations was a skill she needed to pick up.

...13 years ago...

Why was her mother doing to her? Why was she marrying that man and taking his last name?

Sure Rose didn't mind having John around, he was nice and would be a great older

brother...but that didn't matter. Why was Mother doing this? Why was Rose gaining a father now after 11 years of going without one. It wasn't fair.

Rose tried to convince John that the marriage was a bad idea, but he trusted his father and her mother too much. Not that she could blame him. He was the perfect child. He was the child anyone could have wished for.

Not like Rose. Rose was strong-willed and followed her own path.

But sometimes that path followed her mother's without her realizing it.

...10 years ago...

Rose and Kanaya were inseparable, BFFs in parlance that would emerge several years later. Kanaya was a calming force upon Rose's darker urges, Rose found herself oddly comforted by the troll's presence.

Pity she was with someone else. But that didn't matter. They had too much fun together.

Especially their pretend games in the sewers.

Sure they shouldn't have been down there, but nothing bad ever happened. Besides, if something did happen, Rose sneaked something from her mother's lab that would help protect them.

They were in the middle of their favorite roleplaying fantasy when Rose stopped and froze as she watched a massive shadow emerge from the deep sewers behind Kanaya. She wanted to scream and warn her friend, but nothing came out.

She watched in terror as the ogre slashed Kanaya across the gut. Rose reached into her pack as the beast started to approach Kanaya's prone form to feast and pulled from it the needles she had borrowed.

Rose felt the dark rage within her soul course down her arms and into the Thorns of Oglooth. Dark tendrils coursed from the needles and through the body of the ogre.

"BACK AWAY FROM HER BEAST!"

Rose vaguely remembered the battle that followed. The only thing she could distinctly remember was the bloodlust that pervaded her as she rended the shadow creature limb from limb and tossed its remains into the sewer waters.

She then turned to check on Kanaya, but even from a distance Rose could tell that the wounds were mortal.

She ran up to her friend's body and cried over her. As she did so, she noticed the Thorns were glowing again. She could do something...she had to do something.

Rose inserted the needles into Kanaya's wounds and poured her hope and love through the conduits...or at least that's what she wanted to do...the true masters of the wands had other plans.

Rose scurried back in terror as Kanaya was engulfed in shadows that crawled over her body like maggots. Kanaya's wounds closed and her eyes opened.

They were pale jade orbs...nothing was there...Rose covered her mouth to keep from screaming...

She couldn't move as Kanaya got up and started to sniff the air around her. Something was wrong. Something wasn't right. Kanaya's head jerked upwards and she climbed up and out of the sewers.

Almost immediately, Rose could hear screams of terror through the open manhole. Screams and horrible wet rending noises.

She crawled out of the sewers, following Kanaya and shrieked as she took in the carnage that was on the street above.

Blood...everywhere...Kanaya was just sitting there, looking at her hands...crying...

Rose ran up to the terrified girl and took her home. They went to Rose's room, making sure that no one saw them. Rose had Kanaya clean herself in Rose's own bathroom while Rose tried her best to clean the stains from Kanaya's clothing.

But she couldn't. She couldn't wash the stains out. So she just burned the clothing.

Then she put the Thorns of Ogloboth back in her mother's safe. She just hoped her mother hadn't noticed them missing.

...6 years ago...

Rose couldn't believe it when her mother had told her she always knew what happened to the Thorns and to Kanaya. It made it so much easier to tell Kanaya's parents together. It also helped that they were so accepting.

It was also came time to graduate from high school. Sure Rose could have gone to any college that she wanted to. But she had decided to work with her mother.

They finally found something in common. Their interest in the powers of the Skaian artifacts.

They would spend the next couple of years studying them. Planning. Rose was taught how to handle the items and was given the Quills of Echnida, her mother's most prized possessions. They weren't conduits of the dark gods that lay in the darkness between realities, they were forces of life.

Rose would meet people with similar goals.

Among those, included her own brother. Her real brother, not like John, one she shared blood with.

She raged at her mother for hiding his existence from her, but her mother explained that she and their father, a mere boy of 15 at the time, had decided to split the children up in some misguided decision and vowed to not contact each other again.

Rose wanted to hate her mother again, but she had put too much effort in rebuilding ties with the woman who gave birth to her.

It just hurt that she found out about her father only months after he was killed defending the city.

But they would help each other.

...4 years ago...

They would work together to organize S.E.E.R.

Rose and Kanaya would run that organization while Dave used one of the first artifacts they recovered to create the infamous Strider Mafia. His first paradox clone became the group's Don. Rose would weep at first each and every time one of Dave's - later Don's - paradox clones was killed, but eventually she learned to numb herself to that sorrow. Dave himself had taken up his Bro's mantle of vigilante, changing the name from SeppuCrow to CrowBro. Other recruits included the daughter of Mrs. Egbert's late patron, Jade Harley and Rose's own step-brother, John.

In time the organization would expand to include two police officers that Rose and Kanaya had come to trust, Sollux Captor and Terezi Pyrope - Dave's lover. Jade would get a job working for the group's greatest and deadliest rival, the military's Nightwatch organization, as a researcher of the artifacts they recovered. She would also risk her life (to Don's chagrin) by 'losing' artifacts to S.E.E.R.

While Rose wanted to keep the organization on the side of light, she quickly found herself drawn into the dark web of deceit and lies that dominated the city. She found herself making deals with the likes of the Midnight Crew and Mr. Pupa. She hated herself for it, but she couldn't afford to make too many enemies. There was too much at stake.

The beings she consulted told her so. She didn't trust the horrorterrors who had used her to corrupt Kanaya years earlier or the angels who opposed the dark gods, but she used them both for her own means.

And they would use her for their own.

...3 years ago...

She never knew why she took that apprentice, she should have seen the darkness within the consort's soul. She should have noticed the creature's twisted ways.

Maybe the angels or horrorterrors blinded her to it for their own purposes. But she still hated herself for training the beast all the same.

Rose wept when she found the salamander missing one day...along with the Thorns of

Ogloboth...

She would hate herself even more years later when Casey Von Salamancer was discovered in the small town of Teapot by Sollux and Terezi, using the dark arts the consort had learned to twist people's dreams so it could kill and devour them.

Rose would take the Thorns after Terezi returned them to her and she would encase them in cement and toss them into the deepest reaches of Alternia Bay.

...Now...

Rose and Kanaya laughed with each other as John fiddled with the exit, trying to leave the women to themselves.

He had enough with being taunted by his sister and her lover. Now Maggie was joining them in the mirth after she was told what Vriska had done to him.

Rose got up and walked over to her step-brother and embraced him.

"I'm sorry John."

"What are you apologizing about?"

"I'm mocking you about love John. I'm sorry about that."

"Oh...I...I guess I'll forgive you."

"I certainly hope so. I think what you're doing for Vriska will matter far more than her sessions with Kanaya and myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, while we can chip through the layers of guilt and self-hatred that she has built up over her life we can't do everything for her. You are providing her an emotional base. You are showing her true support, something she hasn't had in years - if ever."

"Well..." John scratched his head and gave Rose his goofy smile, "Damn, I'm not sure what I should say about that."

"Nothing at all John, I'm thanking you for showing me that there are still good people in this city. That there are some things that exist beyond the shades of grey I've come to live in since founding S.E.E.R."

Rose hugged him and kissed him upon the cheek.

"Now you just need to watch yourself. If Portia can create webbing somehow, Vriska most certainly can as well," Rose gave her step-brother a very dirty, knowing smile,

"But who knows, you might be into that kind of thing."

John blushed and pushed Rose away as she laughed uncontrollably.

"I'll see you all later."

"Alright John, have a good evening. Don't let Vriska bite you too hard."

"Shut up."

He started to close the door behind himself when a deep rumble shook the S.E.E.R. Base.

"What the hell was that?"

"I don't know. Can't be an earthquake, this isn't a seismic area."

"Something like imps, ogres or the other shadow beasts? Or maybe something else attacking us?"

"That's impossible, our sensors would have picked up anyone approaching us through the sewers or from the surface. Plus the paradox scouts haven't-"

Rose froze as her phone came to life. No...it couldn't be... She answered her phone.
"Yes?"

"Yeah, sorry to ruin your fun. But shit's fixing to hit the fan in a fucking huge way. This is Super Bowl half-time level shit moving through industrial air movers stuff, Michael Bay would love to have the budget to make this kind of shit."

"What do you mean? Where are you?"

"I was to the south, but I had to retreat and now it looks like I'm the last one of us left out here. My luck. It's a goddamn paradox clean-up out here Rose. It's fucking Night-"

Rose nearly dropped the phone when the paradox clone was cut short by an intense burst of automatic gunfire. She heard footsteps come up to the clone's communicator and it was suddenly disconnected by what sounded like a well-placed stomp.

Another round of what Rose now realized were explosions shook the S.E.E.R. base and dust fell from the ceiling.

"Oh...oh no..."

"Spaced Out" by Wigmund

Another boring day almost over.

Jade sighed as she sat her desk and fiddled with the latest Skaian artifact Nightwatch had handed her. It was a broken dud, but she had to carefully look it over to make her employers happy.

She was staring off into space, imagining what her and Don Strider would be doing later that night. Well, what they would be doing after she met him for dinner.

She sighed contentedly and blushed.

Jade jerked back to reality when she heard a soft cough behind her. She turned around and looked up at one of the many Nightwatch Commanders who prowled the R&D Facility.

"Sorry about that, you seemed to be preoccupied."

"It's alright, long day and all that."

He beamed at her, it was a nice smile. But something lurked underneath it. Something that screamed he was incredibly dangerous despite the sincere warmth he radiated.

"I can imagine Dr. Harley, having to sit around and look at broken trinkets all day. I imagine you'd pass your empty time with imagining what you would be doing elsewhere."

Jade's usual smile started to fade from her face.

"What brings you here Sir?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say that it has to do with your activities elsewhere."

The commander's smile disappeared and he pulled out a service pistol. Two Nightwatch soldiers entered the room in full gear. Jade tried not to panic, but from the way the commander frowned at her in sympathy, she could tell she wasn't hiding it at all.

"I am sorry about this Doctor Jade Harley, but I have to ask you to surrender yourself to the 413th Artifact Recovery Operations Group of the United States Army. You are under arrest for suspected crimes that among other charges includes espionage and mishandling secured Skaian artifacts. We also believe you are working with the Society for the Elevation of Ectotechnological Research, which we are currently sending most of our company out to destroy."

Jade started to speak, but the man just shook his head at her.

"Please ma'am, I do not want to make this any harder upon ourselves than it currently is. In fact-"

Her phone rang.

Oh shit, it was Rose.

Jade raised her hands in the air and backed away from her desk. The commander kept his gun trained on her and answered the phone.

He listened to Rose and then smiled like he was a small boy who had found something particularly interesting under a rock.

"Ah, so I take it that you must be the famous Oracle of S.E.E.R."

He listened to the chatter from the other end of the line.

"She's here my dear, but the problem is-"

Jade took her opportunity, she had to warn Rose. Jade took a deep breath and shrieked at the top of her voice so Rose could hear her over the phone.

"**RUN ROSE! THEY FOUND THE BASE AND THEY'VE SENT A COMPANY TO KILL YOU-**"

The commander's eyes hardened instantly and the gun in his hand leveled itself with her chest and went off. All of this happened in an instant.

Jade fell onto her back and stared in shock at the ceiling. The commander was still on the phone, talking as if he had to shoo off a rude waiter at a restaurant.

"How I hate it when people interrupt me."

Jade's vision started to tunnel.

It was going dark, but she could hear Rose was still on the phone with the commander.

Jade tried to speak. But all she could do was cough up a bit of something warm and wet. It didn't hurt much...

"I am no monster, I am merely doing my job. Not that I can say the same about your organization."

She could hear him disconnect from the call...or had Rose disconnected first? Jade didn't know, but she was curious for some reason.

Maybe she just needed to think about something else than the cold that had taken her arms and legs and was creeping into her chest.

Her vision was fading, but she saw the commander kneel down over her and she felt him brush away her hair. He frowned sadly at her and sighed.

"I didn't want to do this. But you forced my hand by trying to reveal yourself to the Oracle. My reactions were beyond my own control."

He took out what seemed to be a handkerchief and wiped the blood the was pooling from Jade's mouth and nose away.

"I'm legitimately sorry my dear. But at least this way, we can pass it off as a lab accident. I will make sure this arrest attempt to show up on your records. I don't want someone who showed so much promise as you did to go out with such a terrible stain."

...15 years ago...

Such promise...

It was something Jade Harley had heard in reference to herself throughout her life. Maybe it was living in the Fuckin Mountains with her eccentric grandfather who was a veritable genius that led to her hearing it so often. He made sure that she was involved in everything he did despite her young age.

He wanted her to not see him as some crazy scientist who was always locked away in his lab, never interacting with his wards. He wanted her to see the wonders the world held. Especially now that the Skaian artifacts had been re-awakened just like he

predicted they would.

Pity he hadn't done that with Jade's father, maybe they would have spoken to each other more before the man died in an accident several years ago, leaving the elderly scientist with a mere toddler to watch over.

He wanted to make it up to the son he never really knew.

So Jade learned to love learning. She came to enjoy exploring the unknown. She loved her grandfather and she loved Bec, the dog he got her when she first showed up on his doorstep 5 years ago.

...10 years ago...

"I am so proud of you Jade. You have shown the world you are something to truly behold."

Jade beamed at her grandfather as the nearly 70 year old man wept openly as she graduated from high school at the age of 15. She had beaten the pants out of everyone to be at the top of her class.

But she surprised everyone by turning down most of the highest-ranked universities in the world to attend the University of Alternia City, her grandfather's alma mater.

She didn't care, she was doing what she wanted to do. Not what anyone else wanted her to do.

Her grandfather couldn't be prouder.

...6 years ago...

Attaining one's master's degree in four years would normally be something to celebrate, let alone several in multiple fields of Physics all at the same time.

But it was hard to be happy when she got the news her grandfather had passed away.

Especially under the circumstances he was found in.

Suicide? He would never commit suicide. Let alone by hanging himself.

Jade left the awards ceremony right after receiving her diplomas and made her way downtown. She was still too young to drink, but she just needed somewhere away from everything she had known. She needed someplace quiet.

What she didn't need was to run into an interesting man.

Jade spoke with him all night long.

Eventually he introduced her to a woman who had worked for her grandfather and had heard quite a bit about Jade.

In fact, the woman, Rose was her name, offered to work with Jade to do something about the Skaian artifacts that littered Alternia City and were the source of the fierce gang wars that caused portions of the city to be only slightly safer than war zones in the third world.

Of course she would help them. Her grandfather would have been so proud of her.

Besides, she would get to work alongside Dave Strider.

Pity he was already dating that police officer he had run into several weeks earlier.

...4 years ago...

Eventually, the three and Rose's troll friend founded the Society for the Elevation for Ectotechnological Research. An awkward name created to fit into the acronym S.E.E.R. which Rose insisted upon. Eventually others would join the organization, but at the beginning it was just Jade, Dave, Rose and Kanaya.

They used the first artifacts they obtained to create a web of deceit around the organization. Dave, who had taken up the persona 'CrowBro' a mere year earlier after the death of his 'Bro', a man he only later found out was the father of both himself and Rose, took a pair of what appeared to be scratch tables.

They all were surprised to find out that they were time devices when Dave created a clone of himself from about 15 minutes in the future. The clone decided to create an organization of his own so Strider could pull double duty in the underworld as CrowBro and the head of a paradox-clone based mafia.

Jade refused to take any artifacts, instead deciding to use her engineering knowledge to craft a suit of powered armor that would allow her to act as one of the city's first superheroes alongside Rose's step-brother who had received an artifact.

Things were going great. Jade was enjoying herself for the first time in years. She had found so many new friends.

And she had a crush.

And someone to be jealous of.

She hated that feeling in her stomach whenever she'd see Dave arm-in-arm with Officer Pyrope.

She could tell it was love.

But she couldn't help herself.

She guessed the first paradox clone had spied her jealously watching the lovebirds, because one day, months after his arrival, he walked up to her and asked her to grab dinner with him.

How could she say no?

...2 years ago...

Eventually Jade found a calling for herself withing S.E.E.R.

She would work for their main rival, Nightwatch, and feed information when she could to Rose.

Don Strider didn't want her to risk her life like that, but she insisted that it was only fair since everyone else put their lives on the line daily.

Especially Don...who lived with the threat of being wiped out for constantly as part of his existence as a paradox clone.

That fear changed him over the two years he and Jade had known each other.

It helped him shed the many layers of shields and defenses Dave had built up over his life. It gave him a reason to open up to someone. It gave him a reason to legitimately enjoy life when he could.

And he wanted to enjoy that life with Jade.

But it was hard for both of them. Hard to commit to something that may end at anytime.

They still tried though.

...6 months ago...

Jade was never so nervous as when she had to hand over some artifacts to the employees of Mr. Pupa within Fort Skaian itself.

Why did Mr. Pupa send his cronies here? Into the base itself with Nightwatch uniforms on? Did he want her to become a suspect?

...2 months ago...

Jade was just as surprised as Don and Dave were when Maggie appeared from the future and claimed to be the daughter of Strider. But what made it difficult was that the girl refused to reveal who her mother was. Was it Jade or was it Terezi?

She had too many similarities to both of them to be sure, plus she'd never remove those damned bird caps when someone was nearby, so they couldn't take the easiest route to figuring out if she was a hybrid or human.

But Jade was more than willing to put up with the girl after she showed Don and her their future. A future where Don was alive far into the future.

Jade didn't want to believe it, but forward travel could only be done along the alpha time line.

Don and Jade took that as a sign to move on with their relationship. To truly commit themselves to each other without fear.

To never fear about what may happen tomorrow, for in the end it will all turn out for the better.

They would be there for each other.

No matter what.

...The Here And Now...

There was a light...

It was closing in...

It felt so welcoming...

"Rest well Dr. Harley and look upon the life you had with joy."

Jade tried to take a deep breath but nothing happened.

She was so cold.

Yet she wasn't uncomfortable.

She stared into the light.

She wish Don was here to see this.

He always enjoyed light shows.

"Excision, Prologue" by Wigmund

"No, Thank you sir, I, uh, am always glad to provide assistance to the proper authorities. Umm, you have a fine day as well."

Tavros Nitram hung up the phone, leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"What are y0u l00king s0 happy f0r?"

He glanced at the woman who entered his chambers, stood up and walked to meet her in the middle of the room where they embraced.

"Umm, nothing much my love. I am, uh, tying up some loose ends that I feared had escaped my control."

Aradia leaned back in his arms and smiled at Tavros coyly, "The great Mr. Pupa has l0st c0ntr0l 0f s0mething? Tell me it cann0t be s0."

Tavros grinned at her and led her to the display of the city he had. He opened the case and retrieved a piece from the southern edge of the city and moved it to City Central.

"Only temporarily my dear. Only temporarily."

Aradia looked at the piece Tavros had moved and at the location he moved it to.

"Why there?"

"Remember those, uh, artifacts that a certain 'hero' looted from us?"

"N0t really. I wasn't truly awake at that p0int. It was 0nly after they appr0ached my resurrecti0n tube did I bec0me aware 0f what was g0ing 0n."

"Ah, I am sorry about that then. Let's just say, that not all of, uh, those artifacts were useless."

Tavros looked down at the map and smiled at the armored soldier figure he had moved, "Pity S.E.E.R. has not found that out as well."

"Excision, Part 1", by Wigmund

"No...this can't be happening..."

Rose stared at ceiling of the main chamber of the S.E.E.R. Base as the room rocked from the sounds of dull explosions that were slowly approaching the area. John slammed the door shut and walked up to Rose, so did Maggie and Kanaya.

"What's going on Rose?"

"We're...we're under attack by them..."

"Who are 'they', I'm not a fan of the mysterious bullshit."

"Do Not Talk To Your Aunt That Way Maggie. She Is Talking About Nightwatch."

"What's Nightwatch and why would they be attacking us?"

Rose wiped the tears that had been forming in her eyes and started to make her way to the opposite side of the room.

"They are the military special forces that you faced at Nakdoofenpap Tower John."

"I thought those guys were just terrorists..."

"They are in their own way. They are here to gather the Skaian artifacts. We have been competing with them for years but until now they have not launched any form of direct attack against S.E.E.R."

"Well, what changed?"

"They found our base somehow. But how did they? The paradox scouts never spotted any of their scouts in this part of the city's sewers and no one's brought a tracking device here..."

Rose froze in her tracks. She turned around suddenly and looked at her step-brother.

"John..."

"What?"

"Didn't you say that you had looted a bunch of useless artifacts from Mr. Pupa's when you rescued Vriska's daughter?"

"Yeah, I gave you and Kanaya the bag after I returned here with Vriska and Portia. Haven't you all sorted through them yet?"

Rose covered her mouth and looked at Kanaya who had the same reaction.

"No...no we haven't, there's such a huge backlog in the artifacts I've been sorting through and..."

"And We Forgot About The Bag In The Commotion That Followed Your Dashing Rescue."

"Kanaya...He must have..."

"Mr. Pupa Is One To Have Plans Within Plans On The Fly."

They walked up to each other and then embraced in fear.

"What's wrong Aunts Rose and Kan?"

"Oh God, I'm sorry...That bastard must have left some trackers amongst the artifacts...but why didn't the base's safeguards keep them from working?"

"Because the safeguards are set up for mundane efforts, not the artifacts. I just want to know why it took a month for something like this to happen."

"He Was Probably Trying To Make Sure They Had Come To Rest At Either Our Base

Or One Of Our Storage Facilities."

"Makes sense, but why sick Nightwatch on-"

Rose stopped when a portion of the wall near the front door exploded, showering a good portion of the hangar with concrete and rebar.

"Everyone follow me!"

Rose ran towards the hallway she was approaching before she stopped to think about the current situation. John, Maggie and Kanaya followed her.

As they entered the hallway, Kanaya shut the door behind her. She saw a group of heavily armed and armored men enter the base. They apparently saw the door closing, because they opened fire and Kanaya could hear heavy rounds impact the reinforced door as she sealed it closed.

Rose led the group deep into the dark reaches of the S.E.E.R. base.

"Wait, Rose."

Rose turned her head slightly towards John.

"If this is the military, does this mean they know about Jade?"

Rose stumbled to a stop and turned to look at John in terror.

"Oh...oh god...I've got to contact her..."

Rose pulled out her phone and dialed Jade's number. She listened to it ring impatiently before someone on the other end picked up.

"Jade? Are you there?"

Rose could hear a man laugh on the other end of the line, "Ah, so I take it that you must be the famous Oracle of S.E.E.R."

"Who is this? Where's Jade."

"She's here my dear, but the problem is-"

"RUN ROSE! THEY FOUND THE BASE AND THEY'VE SENT A COMPANY TO KILL YOU-"

Rose jumped as a gunshot went off over the phone line and she heard a body fall heavily to the floor.

"How I hate it when people interrupt me."

Rose started to cry, "You fucking monster..."

"I am no monster, I am merely doing my job. Not that I can say the same about your organization."

Rose hung up the phone before she had to deal with the man on the other end of the line anymore.

She backed up to a nearby wall, leaned up against it and slumped to the floor, weeping.

"Rose?"

"They...they got to her...Jade...she...she's..."

Maggie covered her mouth and screamed in grief into her hands. Kanaya knelt down next to Rose and embraced her, both weeping.

John just stared into space, disbelieving, "She's fine isn't she? Jade's fine...right?"

Rose looked up at her step-brother and shook her head. John looked up to the ceiling and rocked on his legs, tears forming in his eyes.

He shook his head and then pulled out his hammer, his Egbertman outfit appearing with it.

"We need to keep moving. If these monsters would hurt Jade, they'll certainly do the same to us."

He looked down at Rose and offered a hand to help her to her feet.

"How much further to the escape route?"

"Routes...they're just down this hall."

"Good, we need to get out of here. I will-"

John stopped when Rose embraced him, weeping into his shirt.

"When we get out of here, we will do nothing at all. We will keep low."

"But Jade-"

"Wouldn't want us needlessly sacrificing ourselves on some foolish quest of vengeance."

John glowered at Rose and slowly nodded in agreement. Rose let go of him and motioned for everyone to follow her.

They ran for what seemed like an hour down the dim hallways that intertwined with the city's sewer system to form what had been S.E.E.R.'s main base. Eventually Rose stopped and pointed at a series of openings that led into the deepest, darkest portions of the sewers.

"There...that's our way out."

"Should we all split up?"

"No, Too Much Danger That Way. You And Maggie Should Take One Route While Rose And Myself Take Another."

"Why can't I just stay behind and kill these fuckers? I-"

Kanaya slapped Maggie's face and glared at her.

"You Would Only Get Yourself Killed."

"But John and Equius were able to handle these guys in that Tower incident I've heard you all talk about!"

"Yes, They Did So Only Because Those Individuals Were Not Prepared To Deal With Them. These Attackers Know What They Are Facing And Have Obviously Prepared Accordingly."

"But-"

"Just shut up and listen to us Maggie."

Maggie looked down at the ground and sniffed loudly, "I...I'm sorry Aunt Rose...I'm sorry Aunt Kan..."

Rose walked up to her niece and hugged the sullen, thick-headed girl.

"It's alright, just listen to us. Follow John and escape through the sewers. Head over to your father's base and we'll meet you there."

Rose then glared at John.

"You've got that bro?"

John glared at Rose and then sighed, "Sure, I'll head to the CrowBro Cave. Me and Maggie will also make sure to avoid any of these Nightwatch guys as well. But you need to promise to do the same Rose."

Rose smiled at him weakly, "Don't worry about me John, I've got Kanaya to watch over

me."

John kissed Rose's forehead, "And I wouldn't want it any other way."

He pulled away from Rose, grabbed Maggie's hand and led her down one of the dark, dank sewer paths.

Rose and Kanaya looked at each other and smiled.

"We Will Need To Contact The Striders To Let Them Know What Has Happened."

Rose wiped her eyes and sobbed a bit, "To let Don know that Jade is dead..."

"We Can Hold Out Hope That They Merely Wounded Her..."

Rose nodded her head and looked at Kanaya.

They held hands and ran down a sewer pipe, disappearing into the darkness.

At the Research and Development Compound at Fort Skaia, a man sat in a wrecked lab and carefully studied a bull-pup submachine gun he had retrieved from his latest victim.

A soldier walked up to him and saluted.

"What is it?"

The soldier cleared his throat, "We just got word from the intrusion teams that they have successfully entered the S.E.E.R. Base."

"Good. Any word on if they have eliminated the Oracle or any other members of that group?"

"No sir, it seems that they fled deeper into the base when our teams were spotted by what appeared to be sentries from the Strider Mafia."

"The Strider Mafia? Well then, I guess our friends' web extends far and wide."

"It appears so."

"Send hunter squads into the deepest portions of the sewers near the Base. I believe our friends may have tried to use escape tunnels to make their way out."

"But sir, the deep sewers are infested with-"

"Soldier. Send hunter squads."

The soldier stopped talking, saluted and then left the lab.

The commander turned on the stool he was sitting on and looked down at the body of the woman he had to shoot. He regretted having to doing that, he had so much to ask her. It was a dreadful thing to find out that S.E.E.R. had a spy in Nightwatch's ranks. Probably explains why Egbertman showed up at Nakdoofenpap Tower. The commander rubbed the cybernetic parts that made up a significant portion of his body as he remembered the pains of that night.

"Excision, Part 2" by Wigmund

After the Green Sun Disaster, Alternia City lost control of its sewer system to strange creatures that emerged from the deepest darkest reaches of the labyrinth beneath the city. The citizens of the city weren't told this, but they suspected it was the reason why city utility workers had armed guards whenever they went to work anywhere and why the subway system was abandoned and elevated train lines where built after the Disaster.

Nowadays, only consorts, military patrols, criminals, madmen and the truly desperate went into the sewers.

Rose and Kanaya were desperate. They needed to escape.

They had to get away from the special forces soldiers of Nightwatch and live so they could figure out what to do next.

"It's been quite some time since we played in the sewers."

"Quite True, What Was It We Were Doing The Last Time We Were This Deep Into The Sewers?"

"Well, to be honest, I believe we were scouting these tunnels to figure out where they ended."

"That Is Not Playing Rose. But I Cannot Recall Where This Particular Line Ended."

"I believe this tunnel goes across the city into the Lost District."

"We Are Going To Flee Across The Entire City?"

"If need be. Are you alright with that? You can leave earlier if you want to, I am most likely their main target."

Kanaya skidded to a stop and looked at Rose. Rose stopped as well and turned to face the troll.

"Do not sacrifice yourself for me Kanaya, I do not want that on my consious. I got you killed once before already-"

Rose stopped when Kanaya walked up to her angrily and the blonde woman flinched when she stopped right in front of her.

But instead of the slap she was expecting for her previous foolish comments, Kanaya wrapped her arms around Rose and pulled her in for a tight embrace.

"Rose..." Rose hugged Kanaya and could feel her love shudder with each breath.

"I Will Never Leave You. You Reminded By My Side When I Was Struck Down So Long Ago, You Stayed There When I Became The Monster I Am Now And You Are Still There Despite All That Has Happened Since Then. I Can Never Repay You For That In Any Way."

Kanaya pulled back and looked into Rose's tear-filled eyes.

"I Will Be By Your Side Even If It Means I Die Yet Again, At Least I Will Be With You In The End."

A quick kiss ended the conversation and the two smiled at each other before heading off again through the darkness below the city.

Hours passed as the two followed the twisting tunnel that stretched across the city.

Occasionally they would see movement in the shadows. Consorts? Imps? Ogres and the other shadow creatures that existed down here? Undead? Whatever was there didn't want to mess with the two, so Rose and Kanaya didn't concern themselves with worrying about the things watching them.

They were more concerned about seeing the other humans, trolls or hybrids down here.

Rose stopped running and leaned against a wall, trying to catch her breath in the stagnant air.

"I am sorry Kanaya, I can't run anymore. I need to rest for a moment."

"It Is Quite Fine My Love, You Do Not Possess Supernatural Enhancements To Your Form."

Rose laughed at Kanaya, "Such a pity, I would quite like to be able to transform into a bat to fly across the city and swoop into the open windows of nubile young girls to seduce them."

Kanaya giggled and raised her arm in front of her face as if she was holding a cape.

"But Why Would I Want To Do That When I Already Have A Perfectly Fine Woman Of My Own? Bluh!"

Rose crossed her arms, looked away from Kanaya and huffed haughtily.

"You have another woman?!"

Kanaya started laughing and leaned against a nearby wall.

"Of course, why wouldn't you. I'm getting old after all," Rose turned around and looked down at herself, "Look at this, I'm getting saggy."

"Well You Wouldn't Be That Way If You Just Wore-"

Rose crossed her arms across her chest and turned her head away from Kanaya, sticking her nose in the air.

"Don't you get started on that again. At least wait until we're around Dave and John again so we can embarrass them by talking about it in front of them."

Kanaya giggled, walked up to Rose and kissed her on her neck. Rose giggled and raised Kanaya's lips to her own.

"We Are In A Rather Filthy Place To Be Doing This."

"But it's not the filthiest. Remember that room we rented in Paris?"

Kanaya shuddered, "Please Do Not Remind Me."

"At least we gave the cockroaches and other vermin something to-"

Rose and Kanaya stopped and turned to look down the sewers. A clanking noise was echoing and it was getting louder.

Closer.

Kanaya grabbed Rose, tossed the woman she loved onto her back and then started running down the tunnel.

"They are rather persistent aren't they?"

"It Appears That Way, But I Do Not Remember The Soldiers I Saw In The Base Making That Much Noise When They Moved."

"Then these must be those Hunters I have heard the consorts that trade with us talk

about."

"Hunters? Why Would They Be Called That?"

"According to the traders, they go into the deepest reaches to retrieve artifacts and other things."

"Other Things? That Sounds Ominous."

"That was what the trader said as well, 'And I shall leave that last bit intentionally vague and ominous because it will obviously be important and involved in future developments. Nak nak nak'."

Kanaya stumbled as she started to laugh at Rose's rather accurate imitation of the Crocodile Trader who would turn in artifacts the consort communities would find in exchange for food and medical supplies. Rose went flying and skidded on the slimy walkway.

"Oh Gog, I Am Sorry Rose. You Surprised Me With That."

Rose got up, rubbed her shoulder and smiled at the clumsy rainbow drinker.

"And here I thought your kind were graceful and perfect. My hopes and dreams are shattered."

They turned and looked down the tunnel. The clanking was still behind them.

"How Are They Keeping Up With Us?"

Rose stopped and looked around them. While they were in a long straight tunnel, there were an endless number of branching paths that extended off the tunnel they were following and then there were the large chambers they passed through while trying to escape their pursuers.

"They're using a different path. Or there's more than one group after us..."

She turned quickly towards Kanaya and started to breathe heavily, nearly panicked.

"Oh...oh god...they're herding us. They know where this tunnel leads..."

"How Could They?"

"Because they have spent the past fifteen years crawling through the sewers, why wouldn't they map them out for their own convenience."

"Should We Then Take A Different Path?"

"No, we have no idea where the side tunnels lead. We could find ourselves in an ogre den or worse."

"That Is A Slightly Better Event Than Facing Multiple Hunter Squads."

"True, but maybe we could-"

"HALT!"

Rose and Kanaya turned to face the armored man who crept out of the side tunnel just in front of them. Two more emerged behind them.

"Fuck."

"Shut up. Surrender yourselves and you will live, otherwise-[/color]" The man chambered the massive gun he was carrying.

"Well Then, It Looks Like We Have No Choice..."

"True Kanaya, but then, we've never been one to make wise decisions."

They smiled at each other as the Hunters approached them.

Kanaya reached into the folds of her dress as Rose did the same. Kanaya pulled out a chainsaw.

"Jegus Fucking Christ!"

Rose pulled out the Quills and leveled them at the soldier in front of the two women and blasted the man through his chest. She could hear the chainsaw roar and then there was the sadly familiar noise of the device encountering flesh.

Rose turned slightly and saw that Kanaya had finished off one soldier and the other had backpedaled into the sewer waters, disappearing into the dark depths of the waters.

"Are you alright my love?"

Kanaya turned to face Rose, her front was coated in brilliant azure-colored blood. Her eyes were wide, but not at the danger stage and they were narrowing back down to normal.

"Azure blood?"

Kanaya looked down at her front and then at the soldier that she had cleaved in twain. She took a swab of the blood on her chest and licked her finger.

"Troll."

Rose turned and looked at the body of the Hunter she had killed, the blood was red. But she could see white fragments jutting out around the edges of the hole her quills had made through the man's chest.

"Rose, Come Look At This."

Rose walked back to Kanaya and looked down at the corpse. Kanaya had removed the man's helmet and was looking intently at the top of his head.

No horns. No wait, Rose knelt down next to the body and felt in his hair. There were horns, but they had been filed down to the scalp.

"This is rather creepy."

"Indeed, But It Makes Sense When You Think About It."

"Anonymity. When they are in their armor, they are no longer human or troll or hybrid or as the body of the one I killed indicates, carapace - they are Hunters."

"Why Would They Do That? I Mean, Other Nightwatch Groups We Have Encountered Did Not Feature Shorn Horns."

"Maybe the Hunters are something beyond the usual Nightwatch. But we don't have time for this, we need to run. There's no reason to doubt that they know we killed these men, so I doubt we'll get such a kind request to surrender again."

The two women ran on down the dark tunnels. From the ambush site, they could hear things crawling out of their holes to feast upon what had been left behind.

The sounds of clanking had halted. That wasn't good. They were no longer being obviously herded. Now they were being hunted.

Rose and Kanaya entered a vast chamber into which multiple sewer tunnels drained their fetid waters into what may have been a vast cavern system, but now was filled with nearly four hundred and thirteen years worth of filth from a city that had grown to over 16 million trolls, humans, hybrids and carapaces as well as untold numbers of consorts.

They looked up and could see sunlight streaming in through an open grate far above them.

"It's been so long since I've actually enjoyed the sun."

"Rose, We Do Not Have Time To Enjoy It Just Yet."

"I know, I know. Let's go, I think we're underneath Narrows Island."

"Maybe We Shall Luck Out And Run Into The Midnight Crew."

"Only if we were so fortunate. Let's not hold our breath for that glimmer of hope."

They kept running across the chamber. Far above them, glowing red goggles watched them enter the tunnels again.

"Sir."

"Go ahead Hunter."

"The quarry has continued on into the gin"

"Good. Make sure the others stay out of reach until the Oracle is disabled, the troll should go down easily after that."

"Affirmative."

"It shouldn't be too much further Kanaya. I think we'll make it..."

Rose and Kanaya grabbed each other's hands and continued to run through the tunnels. They picked up their pace.

There was a soft thumping noise ahead of them. They froze and something about the size of a soda can bounced off of Rose's forehead, sending her reeling backwards. Kanaya saw what the item was and turned away. Rose stared in terror at the item and could make out the print:

Model 1025 Flash-Bang

WARNING: Do Not Look Directly At Device During Use

There was an intense bright light and intense noise and then nothing but darkness. Rose screamed in pain as she clutched her eyes. They burned.

Kanaya shook off the stunning effect and turned to look at Rose, her love was down on the ground. Screaming and clutching at her eyes. Kanaya knelt down and pulled Rose's hands away, but then released her hands when she saw what was underneath them.

Not again...

Kanaya stood up and looked down at Rose, she could hear the clanking again. Lots of clanking. The troll jerked as something hit her in the gut.

She reached down and raised her hand to see her own brilliant jade blood coating it. She turned her head and saw the Hunters approaching herself and Rose.

Kanaya worked a foot underneath Rose and tossed her into an alcove that would shield her from any crossfire.

Kanaya reached down and retrieved her chainsaw as several more bullets tore through her body. It hurt. It hurt so much.

But she was feeling better.

She loved this feeling.

Kanaya's pupil widened, turning her eyes into black orbs.

It was time to feast.

"Excision, Part 3" by Wigmund

The Nightwatch Commander stared at his comm equipment as the sounds of intense gunfire, screams of terror, what for all the world sounded like a chainsaw and feral shrieks of what was obviously pure rage poured out of the speakers.

The man picked up his transmitter, "Hunter Unit 001 Report In, This is Nightwatch Command. Unit 001 Report In."

Nothing but more gunfire and tearing noises.

"Unit 013 Report In."

The crackle of someone turning on their own mic came over the radio.

"This is Unit 013 Commander."

"What is the situation, what has happened to the quarry?"

"It's a clusterfuck sir."

"Clarify your statement, what happened?"

"Unit 001 launched a flash-bang device at the Oracle and her companion, we believe the Oracle was disabled, but her companion-"

The soldier stopped talking as he opened fire on something, a revving sound started to approach his position.

"OHFUCKOHFUCKOHFUCK!"

"SOLDIER, CALM DOWN."

"SHE'S JUST TAKING IT! WE'RE EMPTYING CLIPS INTO HER AND SHE'S JUST TAKING IT! OHGOD-"

The soldier was cut off when screamed in terror before being cut off by the sound of a dull impact. He continued to groan.

The commander steepled his hands in front of himself and rested his head behind his fingers as he continued to stare at the speakers.

There were the sounds of gunfire, now dying off and the noise of a chainsaw encountering something wet continued.

Then there was silence excepted for the panicked breathing of the squad leader of Unit 013.

"Oh god sir, she's...she's coming for me..."

"Who is she? The female companion?"

"She's a fucking monster...she...she...OHGODPLEASENO!"

The commander heard the man get cut off in a strangled gurgle and then he heard what for all the world sounded like someone slurping soup. Interesting.

"I wonder if you can hear me. Is this the Oracle's companion?"

The slurping stopped and the commander heard the man's helmet being removed.

"Who Is This?"

"I guess the best way you could refer to me at this point is to call me Nemesis."

"Nemesis? You Do Not Sound Like A Female And It Is Rather Obvious That You Are Not Distributing What Is Due."

"Female? I take it you are referring to the Ancient Greek image of Nemesis as the

distributor of what is due, fortune whether it be for good or bad. Am I correct?"

"If You Want To Put It In Such Simplistic Terms, Then Yes."

"I am a simple man, my dear."

"Do Not Refer To Me In Such A Manner."

The Nightwatch Commander laughed over the radio and he heard the woman harrumph.

"Then what should I call you? Because this is rather important because it is rather obvious your file needs to be updated to something beyond 'female troll companion of Oracle of S.E.E.R., works with Alternia City Police Department as a medical officer while running a free medical clinic in the slums of The Settlements'. Just putting down the name 'Kanaya Maryam' doesn't seem to convey the obvious threat you pose to the city and the country."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Do not worry about your parents Miss Maryam. Your family is quite safe from us, we are not Mr. Pupa, the Midnight Crew or even the Strider Mafia which I believe you are quite familiar with."

"I...I Believe I Have Nothing Else To Say To You Nemesis."

"Please, call me Commander Nemesis - I have always wanted to hear what that sounded like."

"As You Wish Commander Nemesis."

"Suitably ominous, good."

"You Are A Monster."

"I don't know how I should take that from a vampire."

A gasp and then silence again. He could still hear breathing over the line, so Kanaya had not left the soldier's body.

"I May Be A Rainbow Drinker," Kanaya stopped while Nemesis laughed at her over the radio, "But At Least I Do Not Intentionally Murder The Innocent And Weak. I Have Only Killed Your Subordinates In Self-Defense."

"Murder? Who have I murdered?"

"Your Organization Was Involved In The Incident At Nakdoofenpap Tower-"

"Nakdoofenpap Tower? Please tell me is the fool who calls himself 'Egbertman' there with you?"

"No."

"Such a pity, I was really looking forward to talking to him again. It's been so long. Do you have any other grievances to file against me, vampire?"

"You Attacked Us And You Are Probably The One Who Shot Jade Harley."

"I'm sorry about the death of your friend. It was an unintentional event."

"I Have No Reason To Believe You. And If You Will Excuse Me, I Have To Escape Your Pathetic Hunters."

"You are excused, but don't worry about any further Hunter encounters, I shall call them off. You have earned it and I look forward to encountering S.E.E.R. again in the future, have a good evening love."

Kanaya screamed in rage and slammed the soldier's head down onto the ground as the Nightwatch Commander changed frequencies on his end.

Kanaya looked down at her body and frowned at all the damage. The bullet holes and

rended flesh would heal soon since she had been feeding during the battle, but her clothes.

They were ruined.

Kanaya made her way back to Rose, who was still in the shadowy alcove.

"Rose? Are You Alright My Love?"

"Kanaya? Kanaya, I can't see anything...What happened?"

Rose started to crawl towards Kanaya's voice, the troll reached down and pulled her companion to her feet and pulled her in close, embracing her as tears streamed down her face.

"I Need To Apologize Rose, I Lost Control."

"I could tell from the uproar after you threw me into the wall. But is it over?"

"Yes, All Of The Hunters That Ambushed Us Have Either Been Killed Or Escaped My Wrath. Their Commander Told Me That He Was Calling Off All Further Pursuit Of Us."

"Their commander? Infuriatingly smug asshole with an odd neutral tone?"

"Yes, I Shall Presume That He Was The One You Spoke To Over Jade's Phone Before She Was..."

Rose nodded grimly and started to rub around her eyes, but jerked her hands back because of the intense pain.

"Kanaya..."

"I Know, You Are Blind. The Flash Must Have Ruined Your Corneas...I Am Sorry."

"You are not to blame for this, so don't apologize. I was going to ask you if you could find something to wrap around my head so I don't risk an infection. Maybe one of the soldiers you killed has a medical kit."

Kanaya moved Rose over to a wall and waited for her to support herself, then she left her to search the many, many bodies. She returned a short time later.

The nurse cleaned Rose's facial wounds and wrapped bandages around her head. Rose grunted and squirmed while she did this.

"There You Go. I Just Wish I Could Do More For You."

"Don't worry about it Kanaya. The beings I have consulted for information have for sometime hinted that something like this would happen. Now I am truly like the seers of old."

"You Are Taking This Too Well Rose."

"My new handicap is nothing to fret about...I..." Rose sniffed, "I still have to tell Don about Jade...my blindness is nothing compared to his loss."

Kanaya wrapped her arms around Rose and embraced her. Rose hugged Kanaya back and then suddenly started to pat her love over her body.

"Kanaya..."

"Yes Rose?"

"It seems that your clothes have been ruined..."

"Yes Rose, They Have. But We Can Worry About That When We Emerge From The Sewers And Cause An Uproar."

Rose laughed at Kanaya and took her arm as the troll lead her blind friend through the sewers.

As they walked through the sewers underneath Narrows Island, a new noise started to echo through the sewers.

"Do you hear that?"

"I Do, But It Does Not Sound Like Another Nightwatch Squad. I Would Swear It Sounds Like-"

Kanaya was cut off as a man fell from an overhanging pipe into the brackish sewer waters. He pulled himself out of the waters and hid out of sight from the pipe, he motioned for Kanaya and Rose to do the same.

Kanaya pulled Rose over to the frightened man and they hid just in time to see a veritable swarm of consort heads emerged from the pipe the man had fallen from. The consorts glanced around for a bit and then withdrew back into the darkness above the group.

The man sighed and turned towards the women and then froze. A purple blush covered his face and he quickly turned his head away from Rose and Kanaya.

"Wwhat the fuck are you doin' downn here and wwwhy the fuck are you practically nude Kan?"

"Excision, Part 4" by Wigmund

Eridan was quite intent on staring a hole through the wall he was facing.

Just his fucking luck, he barely escapes from a horde of angry tribal consorts, falls in fucking sewer waters - who fucking knows how many shots he's gonna need to keep from picking up something filthy - and finds himself next to two fucking hot women - one of whom is practically nude - and just his luck they're the lesbians from the police station. Why can't he ever have good luck?

Eridan rubbed the bridge of his nose, snorted to remove the shit that had got up into his sinuses when he took a swim and sighed miserably.

"Fuckin fortunes. Alwways fuckin me ovver."

"Greetings Detective Ampora."

"Hello Kan, wwhat brings you twwo downn into the deeper reaches of the sewwers?"

Rose cocked her head towards Kanaya.

"It's Eridan?"

"Yes, Yes It Is."

"What is *he* doing down here?"

Eridan harrumphed and put his forehead on the cool wall, relieving the pounding headache he had.

"*He* wwas downn here because someone employed him to look for the Consort Market."

"Oh...sorry about that..."

"No problem, after twwenty-sevven years I am quite used to bein treated as if I don't exist. It helps me do my fuckin job nowwadays."

Eridan glanced over his shoulder cautiously at the two women, thankfully Kanaya had taken a position behind Rose so she wasn't quite as...revealed...as she was a moment again.

"If you don't mind the stench you can take my coat Kan."

"Thank You, But-"

"Please, you're nude accordin to the fuckin law and I'd like to be able to face the people I'm talkin to."

Before Kanaya could object again, Eridan had removed his trench coat and tossed it over his shoulder to the women. He looked down at his shirt and sighed.

It was ruined and it was his favorite.

"You decent Kan?"

"As Descent As I Can Be Considering You Have A Slighter Build Than I Do, But I Doubt I Shall Cause Further Embarrassment For You."

Rose giggled and Eridan blushed. Why oh why did everyone enjoy tormenting him?

He turned around and glared at the two women. He stopped when he had a chance to really take a good look at them. The blonde human - Rose, that was her name, he had seen her at the APD HQ a couple of times when they consulted the police on some

high-profile cases - had her eyes bandaged over and there were obvious burn marks on her cheeks and the end of her nose. Kanaya looked fine, but there were obvious bullet wounds in her gut that were scabbed over and the tear patterns on what few clothes she had on when Eridan arrived meant she had been shot a lot. She should be a pile of ground meat somewhere down here, but here she was standing in front of him.

Curious.

Eridan looked back and forth between the women and sighed yet again.

"I told you twwo wwhat I wwas doin down here, so wwhy don't you tell me wwhat you twwo wwere up to?"

"We Were Just Having A Romantic Escapade Roleplaying One Of Our Favorite Television Shows."

"Is that right?" Eridan continued to stare at the two.

"Yes...yes, we were. We were pretending to be a beautiful district attorney who falls for a unfortunate mutant who lives in the sewers but has built a utopian community of the homeless and downtrodden."

"You twwo are a bit young to remember that showw."

"We Enjoyed Watching Recordings Of It."

"That may be true, but it wwas not the reason you twwo wwere down here. That does not provide a reason that Ros has some vvery fresh burn wwounds on her face and why you, Kan, look like you just wwalked out of a hailstorm of bullets wwith nothing but fresh scars to showw for it. Wwhat the fuck happened to you twwo and did it havve anything to do wwith those scary fucks in armor that wwere running around down here just a couple of hours ago."

Rose stopped and Kanaya took her shoulders, "You ran into a Hunter Squad?"

"Hunters? Is that wwhat those fuckin psychos are called? I saww a group of them moving around down here, but I avvoided them. Problem wwas is that they stirred up the local consort tribes. I wwas almost at the fuckin Market wwhen some Crocs jumped me and tried to drag me off to throww into one of their fuckin soups. I managed to get away from them and wwile running like a fuckin idiot, I ended up here."

"I'm sorry about that Detective Ampora, we are responsible for the Hunters running around here. We-"

"You don't havve to explain wwhy, it doesn't take a wwhole lot to stir up the fuckin military down here. I'm not going to pry any further."

Eridan stood up straight and stretched his long thin body and winced as the various bumps and brusies he had gained since leaving his office just several hours earlier screamed in unision. He rubbed his head and winced when he hit the still-healing bullet wound that marked where Mr. Pupa had expressed his displeasure of Eridan.

"Fuckin Pupa, shootin me in the fuckin head. And just after he fuckin tried to givve me those damned needles-"

"What needles?"

"Wwhat? Ah fuck, wwas I thinkin out loud again?"

"You were, but right now you must tell me about those needles Pupa tried to give you."

Eridan scratched his head, confused. These strange women, why were they more concerned about some fucking needles than trying to get out of the sewers.

"Wwell, uh, they were about a foot long each and looked like they wwere carvved from something like fuckin bone or maybe ivory."

Rose sighed audibly and clutched Kanaya, "I don't know of those wands, but at least he doesn't have his hands on the Thorns..."

"But enough about my fuckin misery, do you twwo need help gettin out of these damned sewwers? My car is parked pretty close to a access point just up this tunnel."

Rose and Kanaya both nodded at the purple-blooded detective and he motioned to them to follow him.

In no time, they all blinked as they emerged onto the surface world. Eridan led the two to his car, opened the rear passenger doors for them and got in behind the wheel.

"Do you wwant me to take you guys to the hospital?"

"No! No, take us somewhere else."

"Alright, wwhere the fuck shall I chauffeur you twwo off to?"

"Take us to the Alternia Island Nature Reserve, I'll give more directions when we get closer"

"The Reservve? Wwell...okay. But along the wway, care to explain wwhat the fuck is going on and wwwhy you got so fuckin hot and bothered about those needles Pupa had?"

"I will..."

As Eridan drove his shitty car through the Old Town and into Foundry, he marveled as Rose told him about the existence of S.E.E.R. and about its purpose. She told him about the three sets of wands: The Thorns of Oglogoth (currently at the bottom of Alternia Bay), The Quills of Echidna (currently in Rose's possession) and the Shards of Hope (thought lost, but thanks to his story - known to be in Pupa's possession). She told him about Vriska's redemption and how that led to the attack by Nightwatch and the death of one of their own.

Eridan stopped just outside the nature reserve...a toxic waste dump was a better way to describe it...and looked back at Kanaya and Rose, "Wwhich wway noww?"

They related directions that led his car deep into the hills that made up the reserve. Eventually they told him to stop and help them climb somewhere. He did so.

He helped the women climb to a cave, which they led him into. Fuck, underground again. But he stopped when they entered a large room that obviously wasn't part of the natural cave.

"Wwhere the fuck are wwe?"

Eridan turned around to confront Rose and Kanaya but froze when something pointy inserted itself into the small of his back. He reflexively raised his hands into the air and crossed them behind his head. He had that move down pat, not even Spades Slick

at his twitchiest would find a reason to stab Eridan...not that Spades Slick ever needed a reason to do that to anyone he encountered.

"NO! Do Not Stab Detective Ampora! He Rescued Us!" Kanaya was motioning at whoever was behind Eridan.

He heard a soft disgruntled sigh and the pointy metal thing decided it had better places to be.

Eridan put his hands back down, turned around and was surprised to see a young woman standing there, glaring hatefully at him. He smiled at her and she squinted her eyes in a way that indicated that Mr. Pointy Metal Thing could return and he would want to meet Mr. Purple Troll Kidney. Eridan backed away from the woman and turned back to Rose and Kanaya.

But he stopped yet again when three men entered the room and stopped to stare at him. Goddammit, today was just a clusterfuck wasn't it? There was CrowBro in full armor, Don Strider and Egbertman. What the fuck. What. The. Fuck.

"Everyone, this is Detective Eridan Ampora."

Eridan heard mumbled responses from everyone in the room. He couldn't hear them, but it looked like Don Strider and CrowBro were cracking jokes at each other. Eridan was confused why a mafia leader would be so relaxed around the psychotic vigilante...hell, he was confused why those two were with Egbertman, the great boy scout of Alternia City.

"Eridan, welcome to S.E.E.R., I wish to offer you membership in our organization."

Eridan glared at Rose as Kanaya led her past him towards a medical bed that had been set up in the room. Rose gritted her teeth as Kanaya tenderly put her down on the bed and the three men ran up to her side. They bombarded her with questions but she waved them off and motioned in Eridan's general direction. He walked up to the bed and took her hand so she could recognize him.

"Wwhy the fuck you offerin me this? Wwhat havve I done to earn this?"

"You led Kanaya and myself out of the city's sewers and here to CrowBro's base."

"That's just fuckin common decency. There's another reason."

Rose squeezed his hand, "It's because the Shards reacted to you. I want to keep an eye on you-"

Don Strider butted in, "Yeah this is fucking lovely y'all. But why are we standing around her holding a membership drive when something fucked up happened to the base."

He put a hand on Rose's shoulder as Egbertman suddenly started to sniff and walked away from the bed.

"We were attacked by Nightwatch Don. They found our base thanks to something Mr. Pupa slipped into the artifacts John looted from his mansion."

"What the fuck? Did you get ahold of Jade? If those goons could take the base, she's

got to be-

"I'm sorry Don."

"What? What are you sorry for...why would you be apologizing..."

"I'm so sorry...it's all my fault...Jade..."

Don Strider stumbled backwards from the bed and came to rest against some supply crates nearby. He was muttering something constantly under his breath and it slowly became audible as a litany of denials and then continued onwards into a throat-scratching roar of rage and grief.

Kanaya embraced Rose and wept openly as CrowBro removed his helmet, revealing himself to be yet another Dave to Eridan's surprise and tried to help himself...well, Don Strider...up from the ground.

"Come on Don, don't fucking collapse on me. Don't become a baby."

He jerked back as the Don shook him off and took a swing at him.

"Of course, we Dave's can't fucking show emotion, we've all got to be cool. We all have to be moody miserable assholes."

Don shoved Dave and knocked him down on his ass.

"Well fuck that. I am no longer you. I haven't been for four fucking years you asshole. I am someone else. And I am one who will flip his fucking shit over Jade."

Dave looked up at Don, pulled himself off the ground and left the room.

"I'm sorry Don...I'm-"

"Blaming yourself for nothing. We all knew Jade was pushing some deep shit when she started to feed us intel from Nightwatch...but...I...she was supposed to live...we were..."

Don Strider removed his black shades and looked at them.

"We were going to move on...Maggie showed us our beautiful future and we were going to work towards it...but...but now..."

He crushed the sunglasses, cutting his hands on the shards. He gritted his teeth and wept.

Egbertman walked up to the Don and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, trying to comfort a friend.

"There has to be a way..."

"A way to what?"

"Don...don't..."

"Don't what? Is there a way to get Jade back? Is there a fucking artifact that will let me get her back?"

Rose shook her head and Don shook John off, "Fuck that! There has to be a way and I'll fucking find it!" He stormed out of the cave, leaving his companions behind.

"He Is Going To Get Himself Killed, Is He Not?"

Rose sniffed, "...I don't know...It's all falling apart Kanaya...It's falling apart isn't it?"

Egbertman walked up to Rose and hugged her, "It's fine Rose. Everything is fine, we've just hit a bump in the road."

"Some bump. Jade's dead, we lost our base with all of the artifacts that were there,

Don just stormed off to do something stupid, I'm blind and we may still be hunted by Nightwatch. How are we going to recover from this, John? How are we?"

John leaned back and brushed Rose's blonde hair back from her bandages that Kanaya was starting to remove so she could do some proper work on her eyes.

"I don't know sis, but I have faith that we will."

Eridan glanced at everyone and started to make his way to a chair to sit down. He did so and cupped his face in his terribly smelly hands. God, he needed a bath after dealing with all of this bullshit.

He started to doze off in that position, but then someone woke him up by throwing a towel at him.

"Hey creepyfuck, go take a shower. You smell like shit."

"Wwhy should I? I can just head home and-"

"Nope, you're stuck here with us until we figure out what the bloody hell we're gonna do with you."

"Wwhat are you all plannin?"

The young woman leaned down in front of Eridan and gazed into his eyes, a wide toothy grin split her face.

"Depends on whether you take up Aunt Rose's offer."

"Wwhat happens if I fuckin don't."

"Fuck if I know, I just know I'm going to enjoy myself either way."

The grin got even wider somehow. Eridan stood up and made his way in the direction the woman indicated the showers were in, backing up, keeping her in his sights all the time.

She scared him.

He got into the showers and was surprised when he got blasted with hot water. Holy hells, hot water. He closed his eyes and took in the steam.

Maybe joining this group wouldn't be so bad...

Back in the main room. Rose gritted her teeth as Kanaya worked on her eyes and face. Trying to repair what she could, removing what she couldn't. Eventually Kanaya wrapped fresh bandages around Rose's head.

"I Am Sorry Rose."

"We're all apologizing for stuff we couldn't control today. Don't join the crowd again Kanaya."

"But...Your Eyes..."

"I can live without them. Though I will miss seeing your face...but my memory will make up for that."

Kanaya snorted, "Maybe Your Memory Can Take Care Of These Wrinkles That Have Popped Up Underneath My Eyes."

"Oh no, I like those wrinkles too much," Rose reached up and felt around for Kanaya's head. When she found it, Rose pulled Kanaya down and kissed her.

"What are we going to do?"

"I Do Not Know, But Maybe It Is As John Says - We Just Have To Have Faith That It Will Improve."

"Foolish boy."

"Hey, I'm still here."

"Foolish boy."

John pulled up a seat next to Rose and held her hand.

"Do you want me to go chase down Don? It's only been an hour so I doubt he's had time to do something stupid."

Rose suddenly squeezed John's hand and started to breath hard.

"John..."

"Did Strider have his turntables with him?"

"Of course, you know Don never lets those things go...oh fuck."

At the Strider Mansion, a man was packing a bag. His red eyes even more so as he sniffed and wiped away the never-ending tears streaming down his face.

"Don't worry Jade...I'll save you...I'll find a way to...I'll save you..."

He continued his mantra, the other paradox clones had clustered around the doorway into his room and watched their boss hesitantly. He turned around to face them and pointed at the next oldest clone besides himself.

"You've earned a promotion. I'm fucking out of here."

The clone stumbled back as his former boss stormed out of the mansion, got into his car and disappeared into the night. The other clones looked at him, wanting guidance.

He just stood there and looked at the disappearing tail lights.

"Well fuck."

"Take It All In Stride" by Wigmund

"What the fuck was his problem? Goddammit, Dave. Is your clone losing his cool?"

Dave Strider checked himself out in the mirror of his cavern base several days after that whole bullshit incident involving Nightwatch and the S.E.E.R. base, nice black eye, but nothing broken. Guy must have been holding back.

Or all that time he's spent sitting around as the Don of the Strider Mafia made that Dave weak. That's probably what has happened to the sap, spent too much fucking time sitting around delegating responsibility to the army of clones that he had made. Hell, guy even started answering to a different name now.

Fucker was Dave, not Don. Don was a god-damned title. It would be like if Dave...Alpha Dave...went around answering to the name 'Crow' or some fucked up shit like that.

Dave sighed and splashed some water in his face. Think through the pain, don't commit yourself, don't get tied down, don't betray yourself... Dave mentally went through the mantra Bro had beaten into him from the moment he could walk.

How dare that fucking clone turn his back on everything Bro had done for him...them...whatever the fuck pronoun applied to multiple clones of a single person being grateful dammit.

...15 years ago...

Dave gripped Bro's hand for dear life after the shock wave from the fucking explosion over Hiveburg knocked them off their Old Town apartment's roof. The sunglasses-wearing man smiled down at the 9 year old who had depended upon him since birth.

Bro swung his young ward onto the rooftop and grinned at the kid after he pulled himself up.

Bro and Dave looked out over the city and watched the smoke rise all over the place.

Bro looked down at Dave and cocked an eyebrow over his large shades.

"Are we gonna go help them?"

Bro picked Dave up and put him on his back.

They had work to do. The two went back into their apartment and Dave waited while Bro donned his SeppuCrow outfit. He'd leave Dave at home to keep an eye on the news and tell him where the worst shit was going down.

Dave always wanted to travel out there with Bro, but he kept being told that he could do that when he could kick Bro's ass during their training sessions.

...6 years ago...

Dave Strider, motherfucking disc jockey and purveyor of the ironically strange, walked

down the street like he owned it. He might as well have, since he made himself well-known to the criminals who frequented Old Town as someone not to fuck with.

Pity he wasn't in Old Town.

As he was going past one of the many dark alleyways that made up The Settlements, something bolted out of the shadows and knocked Dave to the ground before running off with some trinkets he'd received from some devoted female fans. Cheap shit, but fuck if Dave was going to let some shit take stuff from him.

"What the fuck!? Hey, give that back asshole!"

Dave tried to chase down the fucker, but he quickly lost track of him. He gave up hope that he'd get the shit back when he heard someone sniffing behind him.

He turned around to leap down the now-repentant thief's throat, but he was surprised to see a cop coming up to him with the goods.

A rather attractive looking cop despite the teal tears streaming down her face.

"H3r3...h3r3 4r3 your goods s1r."

"Oh hey, look at that. You got my cheap shit back from that punk. Thanks...?"

Dave glanced down at the name tag on her chest, "Miss Pyrope."

Officer Pyrope wiped her face and grinned at Dave, "No probl3m, 1 w4s just do1ng my job."

"Does your job usually involve you crying like that?"

"Wh4t 4r3 you t4lk1ng 4bout? 1'm f1n3..."

"Didn't know fine for hot female cops included having tears run down their faces like the Reservoir Dam had burst."

"Hot?...4r3 you try1ng to h1t on m3 s1r? You know th4t 1 could br1ng you 1n for th4t."

Dave stuck his hands out at Officer Pyrope to let her cuff him, he gave her his trademarked smug smirk. She laughed at him.

"1 b3t you would 3njoy th4t wouldn't you?"

"About as much as I would enjoy having a drink and dinner with you tonight after your shift ends. What do you think about the Cod Place?"

"Hmmm...1nt3r3st1ng, but w3 4r3 both und3r4g3d for dr1nks."

"Which is why I suggested the Cod Place."

Officer Pyrope looked away from Dave and seemed to be deep in thought. She eventually turned back to him, smiling.

"Sur3, 1'll s33 you th3r3 4bout 6pm."

"You can count on that," Dave smiled at Officer Pyrope as she walked away from him, obviously putting some swing in those hips as she did so.

He turned around and started to make his way back to his apartment when he suddenly stopped and slapped himself on the forehead.

"Fuck, I forgot to ask for her first name."

...5 years ago...

Dave got the call from his Bro after a long night with Terezi. She was asleep on top of him and he had to toss her off to answer the phone.

He jumped out of bed, quickly got dressed and hauled ass across town when the voice on the other end of the line wasn't Bro's, but Spade Slick's.

Dave reached the Paint Job just in time to see the four leaders of the Midnight Crew on the roof of their establishment throw something over the edge.

He froze in horror as he watched his Bro's body jerk at the end of the noose. His own blade run through his gut.

Dave yelled in rage and grief at the Crew, but Spades Slick just looked down at the boy and sneered at him.

Dave would have never had a chance against them. So he just ran back home. He slammed the door shut and was surprised to see Terezi was waiting for him.

"Wh4t's wrong D4v3?"

Dave wiped his face and took a deep breath, bringing a composure he hadn't had in years.

"Bro's dead."

Terezi gasped and covered her mouth, "How?"

"Midnight Crew. He must have been doing something as SeppuCrow and they caught him...he...they..."

Dave's composure started to break, Terezi walked up to him and embraced him.

"I'm sorry D4v3...I'm so sorry..."

"I don't need pity. I need vengeance."

"How? How c4n you g3t v3ng34nc3?"

"I'll take up Bro's banner. I'll become a vigilante. I'll take up the Crow mantle."

And so he did, Dave took up the name CrowBro and became a terror of Alternia City's underworld. Unlike SeppuCrow who preferred to leave his targets alive, CrowBro left a carcass.

Eventually his activities caught the attention of someone else.

Rose Lalonde.

The first time Dave meet her, he realized something was wrong.

They looked too much alike.

Rose agreed.

Eventually she brought him to her mother...a woman he came to find out was his own mother...

She told them about an affair she had years earlier with a man who was much younger

than she was. They had run across each other and had a brief night of passion.

A night that ended up with two consequences. When Dave and Rose were born, the parents for some reason decided to split the children up. Mrs. Lalonde would return to her husband with Rose who she would convince was his own.

And Dave would go with the father he would call Bro. The man he never knew was his actual father.

Lies, he had been fed nothing but lies for almost twenty years.

Something inside Dave hardened.

...4 years ago...

Eventually Dave would hear from his sister again. She had decided to do something about the criminals and artifacts that threatened Alternia City.

She was going to create a secret society to secure artifacts. She was going to call the group S.E.E.R., Dave didn't give a shit about what the initials stood for.

All he wanted to know was how he could help. She told him to meet her later.

When that later arrived, Dave was handed what looked like a pair of fucking turntables.

"What the fuck is this?"

"We believe those turntables manipulate time. They allow you to travel backwards temporarily."

"Backwards? Why the fuck can't I move forward?"

"We're not sure, but we believe it's-"

Rose stopped as a soft bamf interrupted her and another Dave stood in the room.

The Daves looked at each other and smiled. Rose looked at them in terror.

"Dave, travel back in time to the moment you appeared!"

The Daves looked at her and simultaneously asked, "Why?"

"Because if you don't, the Dave who just appeared is a paradox clone. He's going to be doomed to die in a horrific manner."

The paradox Dave's eyebrows raised in surprise. Alpha Dave smirked, "Well maybe I have a plan."

Paradox Dave turned towards himself, "You do?"

"Of course, do we realize that with these turntables that we could create an army of paradox Daves?"

Paradox Dave nodded, "But, we'd all be doomed to die."

"Exactly, but in the meantime, they could be useful. We could wage war with the cartels and gangs on their own terms."

Paradox Dave looked at his Alpha self, confused.

"A mother-fucking Strider Mafia with the oldest clone as the Don of the whole shebang."

Paradox Dave looked down at the turntables and then back up at Alpha Dave, "That's a fucking great idea. Let's get this shit on!"

They shook hands and set to work.

Unfortunately for Paradox Dave, this meant he had to stay at S.E.E.R. until they could set up a base of operations for the Mafia. He was fine with that. Better than trying to stay at his old apartment with himself and have to deal with Terezi...

Oh god...Terezi...Paradox Dave stared at the ceiling and realized how much he fucking missed her. Alpha Dave didn't have to go through this. Fucking hell.

But then Paradox Dave ran into Jade. He vaguely remembered her from the night he met Terezi, she had shown up at the bar before Terezi did and the two hit it off rather well. Pity he had already decided to date the cop, Jade seemed like a fun gal.

A bit ditzy, but still fun.

Paradox Dave saw Jade watching Dave and Terezi tour the S.E.E.R. Base, sadness and misery just poured off of her.

God damn, he knew how she felt.

"I'm sorry."

Jade jumped in surprise and turned to glare at Paradox Dave, "What for?"

"Well, spooking you while trying to say hello."

Jade giggled a bit, "That's alright, what do you want Don?"

"Well, I was just wondering if...wait, Don?"

"Oh, I'm sorry about that Dave. It's just a label I attached to you to separate you and Alpha Dave. He's Dave...because well, he's Alpha Dave and you're Don because you're the Don of the Strider Mafia."

Paradox Dave leaned back and scratched his chin, "Don...I kinda like that. Better than being constantly reminded I'm gonna meet a grisly fate."

Jade's eyes watered up when he said that.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean that!"

Jade laughed and wiped her eyes, "I know...it's just that I don't like the idea that you'll die...it's just not right."

"Yeah, it's shitty. But until then, I guess I'll just have to deal with it."

"I guess that's true. But...what were you wanting to ask me?"

Jade started to beam at Para...she was beaming at Don as he scratched his head.

"Well, I was kinda wondering if you wanted to join me for dinner? I'm kinda bored and lonely...and I...dunno..."

Jade hugged Don, "OF COURSE! I'D LOVE TO!"

Don almost lost his composure, but quickly regained it.

"Cool, gives me something to look forward to."

...2 years ago...

Don couldn't believe what he was hearing...Jade wanted to throw herself into the lion's den?

He tried to talk her out of it, he tried to convince her that she was doing enough as Space Lass. But she wouldn't listen to him. She said that she hardly ever used her superhero persona since CrowBro and Egbertman did their jobs so well. She felt guilty because Don and the Strider clones risked, and lost, their lives every day. She had to do something to contribute.

Don couldn't dissuade her, she was always so hard-headed when she set her mind on something.

Maybe that's what he loved so much about her.

All he could do after a while was to hope that she'd never come to harm.

He had no idea what he'd do if that happened.

Meanwhile, Dave was having his own troubles involving S.E.E.R.

The police kept finding his fucking dead paradox clones. Especially after the Midnight Crew, Felt or Kingpin's Mob got ahold of them.

Goddammit Paradox, couldn't you keep track of these damned bodies? Dave hated it when he had to face Terezi after she had to investigate cases involving his clones.

She was so damned distraught and he didn't know how to help her with it.

He never knew what to say. He hated to see her be in pain, but he just couldn't get past the shields Bro had him build over his lifetime. He couldn't truly comfort her, no matter how much he wanted to.

...1 year ago...

Dave was starting to regret cloning himself. God damned fucker never got around to dying like Rose had told them he should have.

3 years of having to watch himself become someone different.

He tried to confront the oldest paradox clone about it, but the clone rebuffed him and told him that he was no longer just Dave's clone. He was Don. Don Strider, the fucking Don of the Strider Mafia.

What the fuck? Don?

Dave tried to talk to Rose about it, but she said that she was just as confused as he was about the first paradox clone's longevity. Then she turned around and said that she wasn't surprised the fucker was becoming someone different.

He may have shared past experiences with Dave, but once they became two individuals, they went their own paths. Especially when the clone became the head of a criminal organization and had to take on the responsibilities entailed. Plus, he was dating Jade and she was having a definite effect upon his personality.

Dave was surprised to hear about that. They hadn't been open about that...

...2 months ago...

A daughter?!

Dave was a fucking father to an 18 year old psychotic bitch?

He did enjoy hearing about how she kicked the ass of his paradox clones. Though he was troubled by the fact no one could figure out who her mother was.

Don meanwhile, had different troubles with the daughter of Dave. Yeah, getting kicked in the crotch hurt like fucking hell. But once Rose had gotten her claws into Maggie, he didn't know what to think of the girl.

She showed him something wonderful.

She showed him his future.

A future with Jade.

He no longer needed to live in fear of death.

He could enjoy himself.

He and Jade could truly be open with each other.

He didn't need the fucking scabs Dave had built up to protect himself.

He could be Don and not regret it.

...3 days ago...

They were supposed to have a future together...

She wasn't supposed to die. They were supposed to get married and have several beautiful children.

But she was dead.

And that fucker Dave expected him to just deal with it.

Fuck that. He wasn't Dave anymore. He'd find a way to bring her back.

Don handed over control of the Mafia to the next oldest clone and left.

He would find a way even it took until the end of time.

It's not like he had anything else to lose.

...1 year from now...

I'll find a way Jade... I've found some clues, I've found some leads.

Please Don, don't torture yourself like this

It's not torture. This is the only thing keeping me going.

You can move on Don. Please Don, don't do this to yourself

I can't Jade! I have to get you back. You were the only thing keeping me going!

...Don...

Don't you understand?! It was the promise of that future that gave me hope! It kept me from worrying about death. You gave me reason to live.

...I love you...

I...I love you Jade...I can't live without you. That's why I have to do this."

...2 years from now...

Don Strider stood in some dusty library in some ass-crack of a third-world nation, and smiled as he read through some old tome about the afterlife.

"This is why I had to do this, Jade. I had to find a way to get you back."

He slammed the book closed and made his way out of the library.

Don blinked as he walked out into the sunlight after spending what felt like months in that dim tomb.

He scratched his face and smiled as he rubbed his fingers through two years worth of beard growth. He had hardly kept care of himself. He had let his hair grow out, he let his beard grow, he never replaced those fucking shades he broke two years ago.

He blinked his red eyes repeatedly and smiled at the sunlight.

"Enjoy the view fucker, you're gonna see these beauties a whole lot more now."

Don pulled out the turntables and tried to keep himself from crying as he wound them back two years.

He couldn't stop himself.

He wept openly for the first time in years.

And he loved it.

...Tonight...

Dave met his gaze in the mirror and frowned. He put his helmet back on and sighed.

"Guess I'm gonna have to track the fucker down and teach him a lesson. I am the Alpha and I am his fucking Omega. If he wants to play hard, I'll show the fucking softie hard."

Dave strode out of the cave serving as the temporary base and ignored the questions from Rose, Kanaya and his daughter about where he was going.

He stopped and glared at the fucking fish-troll who had taken up residence at the place until the girls could decide what they wanted to him. Fucking lazy worthless detective.

Always spent his time wandering around the place sighing and acting pathetic. Always moaning about how he was so lonely and couldn't get a good shake in life.

Fuck that, whiny shit should just learn to suck it up.

But Dave didn't have time to give life lessons to terminal losers. He had a fucking clone to beat down.

Not too far away, in The Foundry, a scraggly and weather-worn man walked up to A Legitimate Establishment and knocked on the door.

A slot on the door opened up and a pair of evil eyes glared at the bum.

"Password?"

The weary traveler looked up at the slot and smiled.

"Here After, Part 1" by Wigmund

When the doorman of the Legitimate Establishment heard the knock on the door, he ran his usual routine.

He opened the slit that allowed him to leer at whoever was trying to get in.

He squinted his eyes at the nasty hobo outside and asked a question he said dozens of times every single day since he got his position as the doorman.

"Password?"

What he didn't have planned into his routine was when the hobo smiled insanely at the slit and leveled a hand cannon at him and uttered what would be the last thing the doorman would hear besides a short, loud report.

"Knock knock, fuckass."

Don grimaced at the door when he realized he had just turned the person who could open it into a bloody mess on the other side, let alone alerting everyone inside that shit was about to get real.

Thankfully the neighborhood wasn't one to ever call the cops when they heard gunfire. Not that the cops would respond this deep into the Mobster Kingpin's territory.

"Well fuck, should have thought out a bit," Don studied the door while he reloaded the fucking heavy-ass hand rifle he was toting. He used it several times on spots he figured the door's locking mechanisms were located. He then booted it.

He was prepared to break his foot, but when the door swung open he was rather shocked.

He walked inside, putting away the hand cannon, retrieving a much more reliable .45 pistol and preparing himself for a firefight.

But all he found was someone waiting beside the doorman's body giving him a distasteful glare, "I shall assume you are here to see the Kingpin. Or am I incorrect sir?"

"Yeah, I'm here to see the fat fuck. We need to make a deal."

"Then follow me sir."

Don followed the majordomo through the nightclub, ignoring the disgusted stares he was getting from the patrons and Mob lackeys. Fuck them, he had more important things on his mind.

The majordomo led Don through a back hallway and they went downstairs into yet another nightclub. One that served the special interests of the Kingpin's inner circle.

Really sick shit.

Don grimaced at the horrifying things going on in the dimly lit room. Eventually the majordomo stopped in front of a darkened alcove and motioned for Don to sit down.

Don did so and waited for his vision to adjust to the darkness. As it did so, he could make out the grotesque, obese form of the man he needed to speak to.

"So what brings you here into my den? And why should I refrain from having my ladies use your corpse in their next performance?" The fat man leaned forward and Don held his breath as the stink of sweat, rot and other thankfully unidentifiable odors wafted over him.

"I need to make a deal with you Kingpin."

"Why the fuck would I want to make a deal with a bum, let alone one who murdered one of my employees?"

"Because I'm fucking Don Strider."

The Kingpin started to laugh, his flabby face jiggling.

"You're a bit disheveled to be the magnificent Don Dave Strider."

"I've had a busy time recently."

Kingpin scratched himself and smiled, **"Is that so? Well then Don Strider, what do you need from me?"**

Don sighed and looked down at the table surface in front of himself, **"I need to access the Here-After."**

"If you wanted to do that, you could have just stood in front of a bus. Would be cleaner and much quicker than the ways I'll use to send you off."

"No, I need to use the Gateway that's underneath this place."

Kingpin froze. He shooed away the women who had been pawing his folds and closed the curtains when they left the alcove.

"I am not going to inquire how you found out about the Gate."

"Good, wasn't gonna tell you."

"Fair enough, but I will ask what you need the Gate for," The Kingpin leaned forward, rested one of his many chins upon his pudgy hands and gave Don a predatory smile, **"And what price will you pay."**

"I...I need to retrieve someone..."

"Hmmm...who is she and how much is she worth to you"

"How did you-"

"You think you're the first person to demand use of the Gate? I get a few requests each year, always for the same thing."

"Retrieving one's true love."

Don glared at Kingpin, **"I won't give you her name you fat fuck, but I will let you know that she is worth everything. And if you don't let me go get her peacefully I will kill every single person in this place and use their remains to line the road between here and my estate."**

The Kingpin raised an eyebrow at Don, **"Is that so? Well then, go ahead and use the Gate. I'll ask for payment later."**

The Kingpin opened the curtains and moved his bulk out of the alcove and led Don

even further into the hive of debauchery. The further they went in, the worse the events going on around them got.

There wasn't anything that the Kingpin wouldn't serve for a paying client.

The things going on with children sickened Don the worst.

Eventually they reached a wrought-iron gate that opened to reveal an old-style freight elevator.

The Kingpin motioned for Don to enter.

Don walked inside and turned to face the Kingpin.

"What now?"

"Just pull that lever to your side, it'll take you to your destination."

The Kingpin gave Don a depraved leering smile, the fat fuck had enjoyed his trip to the elevator and now was enjoying himself even more as he watched his greatest foe depend upon him for something.

"Have fun and good luck upon your quest."

Don pulled the lever and the elevator started to descend, the Kingpin's laughter echoed down the shaft after him.

Into the darkness, Don descended.

Eventually he noticed that the rock walls he had been staring at had disappeared and it was nothing but inky blackness beyond the elevator shaft's iron frame.

Blackness and the hint of something...or somethings...out there.

Massive things that he was suddenly very glad that he couldn't see.

Was this what Maggie was talking about when she talked about the things that were devouring the future from whence she came?

Don leaned against the elevator's wall and slid down. Was this going to cause the end of the world?

No, there was the future Maggie had shown him.

The one with him and Jade and their beautiful children.

There was no way Maggie's time devices could have taken him into a false future.

But what if his actions had caused the future to fracture and this was the doomed timeline she came from?

Don covered his head and sobbed as he thought about the future he and Jade were

supposed to have, but then he noticed a glow far below.

He turned so he could look down as best as he could.

No...

There was no way that Jade was there...

She was a good person...

She never end up there...

Don stared in horror at the massive glowing realm that the elevator was approaching.

He could see the flames and magma lakes lighting up what was literally a hellish landscape.

"I'll storm the very Gates of Hell to get you back Jade."

The elevator ground to a stop and the door opened.

Don Strider walked out of the iron transport and looked down at the path in front of him.

It ended up a couple of steps ahead of himself.

"Well fuck, I was hoping for a gilded road leading me to her."

As he uttered that, the path extended itself in the distance.

He smiled, "Well that's better," and began walking.

"Jade...I'm coming for you."

"Here After, Part 2" by Wigmund

The path through Hell is never a straight one. That is what Don Strider was discovering as he followed the simple dirt trail that led from the iron elevator off into the smoke-clouded distance.

"I swear, if this fucking path is leading me in circles..."

"WHO ARE YOU?"

Don stopped and looked around himself, confused.

"What?"

"WHO ARE YOU, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

"I am the motherfucker who's storming Hell to get what shouldn't be here back!"

Don spun around trying to find the source of the voice, but it seemed to be emanating from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"WHAT DID YOU LOSE?"

Don stopped, "I lost the most important thing in my life, I lost the one thing that made every day worth living."

"WHAT WAS IT?"

"My love..."

There was a slight shift in the air and Don felt a presence behind him. He pulled his pistol, spun and leveled it at the cloaked figure who had appeared.

"Don't fucking think about it."

The figure raised what may have been arms, "PLEASE, PUT AWAY YOUR WEAPON. IT IS NOT NEEDED HERE."

Don glanced around himself, seeing nothing but the flame-wracked ruins of Hell, shrugged his shoulders and put away the pistol.

"What do you want? Do I need to make a bargain with you?"

"NO, I AM MERELY HERE TO HELP YOU."

"What makes you think I need your help?"

"YOU HAVE BEEN WALKING IN CIRCLES FOR AWHILE..."

"...Goddammit..."

"...AND YOU LOOK FAMILIAR."

Don cocked an eyebrow, "Not surprised, plenty of guys looking like me have been sent here. Risk of the game I've been playing."

"HMMMMMM"

"So how are you going to help me?"

"TELL ME WHAT YOU ARE SEEKING, WHAT YOU ARE TRULY, HONESTLY SEEKING, AND I WILL BE ABLE TO LEAD YOU THERE"

"So I just have to tell you who I'm looking for and you'll lead me to her?"

"YES."

"No deal, I've already bargained with one demon. I don't need another marker on my soul."

Don concentrated on what he was seeking again and looked at the path.

It stopped at his feet.

He pulled the pistol again and leveled it at the specter, "WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO THE PATH!?"

"WHAT PATH?"

"THE PATH THROUGH HELL THAT WAS LEADING ME TO MY TRUE LOVE WHO HAD LOST HER LIFE BEFORE HER TIME!"

"HELL? YOU THINK THIS PLACE IS HELL?"

The specter sounded hurt and confused.

"Of course, the flames, smoke and sulfur smell tend to lead to that conclusion."

"I SEE NO FLAMES HERE."

Don started to laugh, he gestured around himself, "WHAT FLAMES?! Can't you see the ruins around you? Can't you see the desolation?"

The specter walked up close to him, he swore there was a face under that hood.

"WHY ARE YOU SEEING THESE THINGS?"

"Because that is where the elevator from the Kingpin's club led me. It dropped me off in Hell and now I need to find a way out to find my love."

"IS YOUR LOVE IN HELL?"

"Of course not, she was an angel...She was something pure and innocent...I didn't deserve her, but she chose to love me anyways..."

Don rubbed his arms and looked away from the specter, trying to hide the tears that his sunglasses would have hidden away.

"FOLLOW ME."

The specter moved away from Don, occasionally turning around to beckon him to follow it. Don sighed and followed the figure.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOUR LOVE WOULD BE?"

"What do you mean?"

"WE ALL CREATE OUR OWN AFTERLIFE. WHERE WE END UP IS A REFLECTION UPON WHAT BROUGHT US PLEASURE IN LIFE," The specter turned towards Don and moved close to him, "AND SOMETIMES WHAT TORTURES US."

"Let me guess, this Hell is all in my own mind?"

"EXACTLY, SO NOW TELL ME WHERE YOU THINK YOUR LOVE WOULD WANT TO SPEND ETERNITY."

Don looked away as he thought about the time he spent with Jade. Smiling he reflected upon the vacations they would take together to get away from everything.

"There was this cabin she loved," Don's eyes misted up again, "It was our retreat from Alternia City, from the responsibilities we both held there. It was a beautiful place on the far side of the mountains next to a crystal blue lake."

The land around them began to shift.

"I swear, that if you got on top of one of the hills, you would have been able to see forever. The air was blue and crisp. The cabin was on the edge of field that flowered every spring."

The crunch of charred earth under Don's feet softened.

"Not only that, there was a gorgeous forest of what she called evergreens and those trees that would change colors every fall. I really wish I knew more about stuff like that, I loved going on walks with her through the forests and listening to her babble on about some tree that was nearby."

"Go on."

"It was strange, the cabin was smaller than either of our places in Alternia City, but it felt more like home than anywhere else I've ever been."

"WHAT WAS THIS CABIN LIKE"

"It was a simple log cabin you always see in the movies when it shows someone who's close to nature or something like that. There was this porch that wrapped around three sides and gave you an excellent view of the sun rise, the lake and the sun set. It had one main level and then this large basement workshop that her grandfather had used to build boats and maintain his hunting gear. She took it over after he died since she shared his hobbies."

Don wiped the tears that were flowing freely down his face.

"She fucking taught me how to fish there. I hooked myself in the foot the first time I tried to cast a line. Fucking hurt like hell."

The specter giggled.

Don stopped and stared at it. What the fuck? A giggle?

It was then that he noticed he wasn't where he thought he was anymore.

He was on the porch of the cabin, next to the crystal blue lake in the mountains far away from Alternia City.

The field was filled with flowers and he could smell the pines and other trees that crowded the mountain sides.

How?

"Wait...how did we? Weren't we in Hell?"

The specter turned around and pointed into the field.

"No, we were just out there."

"But...how...where did you?"

"I SAW YOU WANDERING THE FIELD, LOST, CONFUSED, ANGRY."

"Where did you come from then."

"HERE."

Don froze, "But...if you are from here...then..."

He stopped and rubbed his eyes. He removed his hands and slowly opened his red eyes.

"Don...why are you here?"

"Here After, Part 3" by Wigmund

Don, what are you doing here?"

Don just stood in the middle of the cabin's living room. A room where he and Jade had spent so many nights curled up together watching the embers of the fireplace, just holding each other, relishing the time they had together, not knowing how much longer it would last. Don took a hesitant breath and smiled at the confused woman in front of him.

"Ja..Jade?"

He walked towards her. Jade backed up a bit confused and slightly frightened.

"Don...what's wrong? Oh god, what happened to you? You look-"

Jade stopped talking as Don took hold of her face and kissed her. Her eyes widened and she pushed him back.

"Don! What is wrong with you?"

Don pulled back from Jade and leaned against a nearby countertop and started to try and compose himself.

"It's been so long...since I felt your face...since I saw you..."

"What do you mean? We just saw each other-"

"A little over three days ago as you see it probably."

"Yeah, but it looks like-"

"Two years for me?"

"Yes, what happened? Why do you look so...why are you so upset?"

"Because I spent the past two years according to my view searching for a way to bring you back. To return you from death."

"Dead? I'm not...I can't be dead..."

Jade shook her head violently and covered her face.

"I can't be..."

"I'm sorry...I should have phrased that better. But you are dead Jade. I'm raiding the Afterlife to get you."

"How did I?.. I remember going to work several days ago and then..."

"And then Nightwatch found out you were spying on them and they killed you. Specifically some asshole who called himself Commander Nemesis."

"It...it can't be...I..."

Jade stopped and looked down at her chest. She was in her lab uniform again. There was a small hole in her chest and her shirt and coat were coated in blood. Don walked up to Jade and embraced her as she wept in shock and terror. Don wept as well.

"I'm sorry Jade...I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

"But if I'm dead and this is the Afterlife, how did you get here Don?"

Don shuddered and was silent.

"Don, what did you do to get here? What did you do?"

"I made a bargain with the Kingpin-"

"What!? Why? You shouldn't have-"

"It was the only way I could get here without killing myself. The fat fuck had built one of his businesses over a gateway leading into the afterlife. I had to make a deal to get here and bring you back."

"But I'm dead...I can't..."

"You can Jade, you can come back and we can have our future together. Death cannot keep me from you."

"But Don, what am I going to do if I go back? I can't return to my job and they've probably seized everything I owned. There's nothing for me..."

"There's me Jade. I'll be there no matter what. I'll help you find something."

Jade sighed and pushed Don away from herself. She walked into the living room and sat down. Jade started to rub the sides of her head, it was her method of dealing with the migraines that emerged when she was truly stressed. Don sat down in a nearby recliner and watched her.

"Dammit Don. Why..." Jade growled and stared at the fireplace, "I know why you're here. But why should I go back. I love you dearly, but what else is there?"

"Dunno," Don wiped his nose and stared at Jade intently, "But I want you to find out and I'll be there to find out with you."

"Well okay then you hard-headed fuckass," Jade glared at Don, but he just smiled at her and she smirked a bit, "How do you plan on getting me out of here? It's not like I can just waltz out of here because you showed up."

"I know, we need to make a deal with someone."

"Who?"

"Dunno, maybe the shithead will show up so I don't have to trek all over the damned place to find him."

"SHITHEAD, EH?" Don smiled as the voice appeared behind him.

"Speak of the fucking devil-"

"Grandpa?!"

Don froze and slowly turned around to look at the figure standing behind him,

"Grandpa?"

Don's smile faded and terror moved across his face like a tidal wave wiping out some third world beach resort crowded with fat white tourists. He had never met Jade's grandfather considering he died before S.E.E.R. was created and Dave had only met her once before then.

But right now, Don wish he would have kept it that way.

"THAT IS NO WAY TO SPEAK OF THE MAN WHO RAISE THE WOMAN YOU LOVE FROM THE TIME SHE WAS IN DIAPERS!"

"GRANDPA!"

Don started to stand up, but a large meaty hand clasped his shoulder and forced him back down into the chair.

"SORRY MY GOOD SIR, BUT I BELIEVE YOU ARE HERE TO MAKE A DEAL. OR AM I MISTAKEN?"

"Uhh....Yeah...I'm here to make a deal, but I thought-"

The massive man had walked around Don and had suddenly leaned down so his face was very close to Don's own. Don could smell the tobacco, red meat and alcohol that made up most of Grandpa Harley's diet. It was the scent of Purified Mangrit.

"THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH SOME BONEY CHAP IN A BLACK ROBE AND A CERTAIN FONDNESS FOR FARMING UTENSILS?"

"Yeah, actually I did."

"TOUGH FUCKING LUCK MY BOY. WHEN IT COMES TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER, HASS "THE FLAME" HARLEY IS THE ONE YOU NEED TO HAVE A PLEASANT CHIT-CHAT WITH."

Grandpa walked over to his granddaughter and hugged her. He patted her on the head, smiling, before taking a seat next to her.

"Grandpa...you're embarrassing me..."

"GOOD, I SPENT THE BETTER PART OF TWENTY YEARS WAITING TO DO THIS TO WHATEVER CHAPPY YOU BROUGHT HOME," He glanced at Jade, who was wearing a brilliant blush, "NOT GONNA BE DENIED THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO EVEN IF I HAPPEN TO HAVE SNUFFED IT SEVERAL YEARS BEFOREHAND."

Don gulped hesitantly, "So...what do I need to do to get Jade back?"

Hass glared at the uppity young man. But he put on a huge toothy grin as he took in what he saw. This wasn't the smug little shit his granddaughter had become smitten with so long ago, this was a man of the world sitting before him. Hass looked upon the dirty well-worn suit, barely trimmed beard and weary red eyes sitting in front of him and approved of the lad.

This is a boy who had traveled to the ends of the Earth and then through Hell to get his love.

That was something Hass "The Flame" Harley approved of.

Hell, he had done it himself. Pity Death doesn't give up his wards twice, not that it prevented Harley from punching the boney wimp in the face while trying.

Hass crossed his arms and thought for a moment, "HMMM, WHAT COULD I DEMAND FROM YOU IN EXCHANGE FOR THE RELEASE OF MY BEAUTIFUL GRANDDAUGHTER INTO YOUR LOVING ARMS?"

"I'm willing to forsake anything for her. I've already traveled the world and made a deal with a man who makes Satan look like a fucking saint."

"I KNOW. WHILE I DO NOT APPROVE OF THAT DEAL, I DO REALIZE THAT SOMETHINGS REQUIRE HORRIBLE BARGAINS..."

Hass stopped and smiled a horrible grin that made Don cringe and Jade cover her face.

"I'VE GOT IT!"

"What?"

Hass stood up and strode over to Don. He picked the messy man up and forced him to stand at attention in front of the massive Harley.

"FIRST THING: YOU WILL FACE SOME HARDSHIPS WHEN YOU LEAVE THE AFTERLIFE. YOU MUST CONTROL YOURSELF AND NOT LOSE YOUR TEMPER UNTIL MY GRANDDAUGHTER IS SAFE FROM HARM."

"First thing?! I thought the bargain was only for one thing!"

"No Jade, it makes sense. I imagine the Kingpin will enjoy doing something to me when we leave here."

"AH, THERE ARE BRAINS BEHIND THOSE SERIOUS BUSINESS EYES. GOOD, GOOD."

"So what is the next part of our deal sir?"

"SIR?!" Hass boomed in laughter and slapped Don on his back, knocking the much smaller man down, "YO DO KNOW HOW TO GET ON MY GOOD SIDE SON!"

"ALRIGHT, THE NEXT PORTION OF OUR DEAL IS ONLY THIS..."

Hass walked over to his granddaughter, helped her up to her feet and escorted her to Don. The old man placed Jade's hands in Don's and beamed at them. They gave him a confused look.

"BEFORE YOU TWO GO ABOUT ANY SILLY BUSINESS," The two lovers blushed, "STOP THAT, I KNOW EXACTLY HOW FAR YOU'VE GONE WITH EACH OTHER"

The blush only got brighter. Jade's jaw dropped and Don started to sweat profusely.

"NOW BEFORE YOU TWO PRACTICE WHAT MY LITTLE ANGEL LIKED TO CALL "EXTREME TANGLEBUDDIES", YOU MUST PUT A RING UPON JADE'S FINGER."

Jade started to gibber insanely fast as Don tried to get his own jaw working again.

"You what? You want me to marry Jade before we...?"

"YES."

Don looked at Jade who was still gibbering, "No problem."

Hass studied the two and then smiled, "GOOD! NOW THAT OUR BARGAINING IS DONE, I SHALL BID YOU TWO ADIEU!"

"Wait Grandpa! That's it? All Don has to do is marry me?"

"BEFORE YOU TWO PLAN ON DOING ANYTHING IN BED TOGETHER, YES."

"But...but..." Jade stopped when Don kissed her and pulled away smiling.

"Let's not question what was just handed to us," Don then turned back to Hass, "So how do we get out of here Gramps?"

"GRAMPS?! CALL ME THAT AGAIN AND YOU'LL BE LEAVING THIS PLACE WITHOUT THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT TO MAKE MY GRANDDAUGHTER A HAPPY WOMAN!"

"GODDAMMIT GRANDPA! Stop talking about us and our love life!"

Grandpa Harley just smiled at his granddaughter, so much like his beloved wife. A fiery thing that one.

"THE WAY OUT IS BEHIND YOU TWO."

Don and Jade turned around to look at where the fireplace was and were surprised to see the iron frame of the elevator behind them. Don opened the gate and led Jade inside.

As he closed the gate, Don nodded at Hass Harley.

He really hoped this was going to be the last time he met that man.

Don started the elevator and steadied himself as the ancient device got to work.

He stood next to Jade and took her hand as he watched them slowly rise out of the afterlife and through the void between worlds.

Thankfully, yet again, they couldn't see the things outside. Though Don was spooked by how at peace Jade was going through that place.

As the elevator neared its destination, Don took a step towards the gate while still holding Jade's hand.

The elevator passed through the dirt below the Legitimate Establishment and Don noticed something had changed.

The wonderfully soft hand he was gripping had changed.

He turned around to face Jade and found something else in her place.

The gate opened into a different room than the one Don had originally disembarked from.

It was now on the stage of the lowest level of the Kingpin's shrine to decadence and corruption and vice. And the house was packed. Don gritted his teeth as Jade looked up at him.

"Do-o-o-on? Wha-a-a-at's wrong?"

The Kingpin roared in laughter along with his cronies and sycophants at the terrible joke as Don stared in horror and rage at what had happened to Jade.

"Ah, there is our brave hero! But look at this! Seems like something has got his goat!"

"Here After, Part 4" by Wigmund

"What the fuck is the meaning of this Kingpin?!
What the fuck do you think yer doing?!"

Don looked at the crowd gathered in the large hall and felt the rage boiling up from his gut. Why was this happening? What would Kingpin want with-
"Humiliation! It's humiliation my dear Don of the Strider Mafia."

The room boomed with laughter as everyone there pointed at Don Strider holding the hand of a bipedal goat wearing goofy glasses.

"Do-o-o-on, please let's just le-e-e-e-eave!"

"Yes! Listen to your goat! Just leave here in shame Strider! I have gotten my repayment!"

"Fine then, if humiliation is what you want," Don turned around and kissed Jade and whispered to her, "I'm sorry about this, I'll uphold my promises to your grandfather and get you to safety before anything else, don't worry my love."

The room roared with laughter at the kiss, Jade wept and bleated in fear and terror, but Don just took ahold of what had been her hand and led her out of the room. He pushed his way through the crowd, surprised that no one was attacking him.

But that wasn't the Kingpin's way. This is was for humiliation, the destruction of an opponent's credibility and image, it does no good to kill them while you that. They wouldn't be around long enough to feel the shame.

Don didn't care, not anymore. He'd find a way to get back at Kingpin later. There was all the time in the world for that now.

Don smiled as he exited the lounge and found the halls leading out of the Legitimate Establishment packed with more lackies and cronies of the Mob, all laughing at him and Jade.

Dave was going to blow a fucking gasket when he finds out about this. Not that Don fucking cared about his temporal twin...wait...younger brother now. Don is now two years older than the rest of the Striders.

But anyways, Don shook himself back to his original train of thought, Dave was going to be pissed. If he still wasn't pissed about Don blowing his cool irony off and punching the smug douche in the face. He probably was, Strider was always one to harbor a grudge.

"Don, why-y-y are you ta-a-a-aking this so calmly? A-a-a-aren't you angry?"
"I'm beyond furious Jade, but I made a promise. Besides, I know we're safe because

the Kingpin's just humiliating us, he leaves those victims alive."

"But...but your ima-a-a-age!"

"Can be rebuilt - excuse me guys, we're trying to get through," Don pushed his way past a couple of boneheaded louts that had decided that this was a great time to stand in the middle of the entry hall.

Don saw that the door was repaired and open. Either he had spent a longer time in the Afterlife than he realized or the Kingpin had a really fast maintenance crew. Hell, there was no sign that somebody had bled out through a fist-sized hole in their face.

The majordomo was waiting by the doorway next to a television monitor that was showing the sweaty face of the Kingpin, a camera on top of the monitor was there to return images of Don to the fat fuck.

"I am rather disappointed with you Strider."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't do my stand-up routine. Unfortunately, I have other places to go at this time."

The Kingpin sneered, he wasn't used to someone being so calm during their humiliation.

"You are truly a funny one, but I shall bid you farewell. I am going to enjoy broadcasting the video of you escorting that goat through my club to all of Alternia City. Your image will be destroyed Strider!"

"Fair enough Fat Ass, but is the lady going to stay a goat or am I going to have to return here and set the place ablaze?"

"It's an illusion set up just for you, she'll return to her usual appearance after you leave the club grounds."

"Good."

"You are taking this too easily Don Strider, what do you have planned?"

The Kingpin was obviously looking distressed and sweaty over the monitor. Good, he was becoming paranoid at Don's cool act, let the fucker sweat.

Don just gave a malevolent tooth grin at the camera and walked out of the club.

The door closed behind Don and Jade, who was still a goat.

"Dammit, guess we have to get farther away from the club. Come on, I don't have a car so it's gonna be a bit of a walk until I can find a payphone."

"Do-o-o-on..."

"I know, I'm doing fine. We'll be home soon and you'll be safe."

The two got to the edge of the parking lot. Don turned around and smiled as Jade stumbled as the spell she was under disappeared.

"Goddamned fat fuckass I should-" Jade flipped off the Kingpin's club before turning around to face Don, "And you!"

She grabbed the front of his tattered coat and pulled Don in for a kiss. Don's eyes widened in surprise.

"Woah."

"Thank you for coming for me."

"You're welcome," Don gave Jade a smart ass grin as she giggled at him, "Come on, we need to get a ride home before one of the Kingpin's goons decides to take a potshot at two people prowling around his boss's club."

The two walked down the street until they reached a phone. Don fumbled through his pockets until he found some loose change that he had forgotten about a long time ago. "My lucky day."

He picked up the phone, stopped to recall the number he needed to dial and pressed the buttons.

Jade watched Don start talking to someone on the other end of the line. There was a brief argument. Don shifted his voice slightly and said something repeatedly.

"God fucking dammit you piece of shit paradox clone, if you make me use this voice ever again, I'll personally make sure you get sewer patrol! What? Yes! Send a fucking limo to the corner of ...oh fuck where are we?"

Don looked up and down the street.

"We're just down the street from the Legitimate Establishment. Yes, I'm in the Foundry. No, we've got a temporary truce with the Kingpin. I want that limo here now!"

Jade jumped as there was a soft bampf behind her and the sound of a large vehicle resettling on its frame.

"Hey boss, heard there was a sad sap out here who needed a lift and instead I found you and this..."

The Dave driving the car stared at Jade. His shades drooped down his nose, showing the Strider red eyes. Don hung up the phone and started towards the limo.

"I thought Jade was dead."

"Was is the key word there."

"Yeah, but...wait, what the hell is up with you Boss? You look-"

"Older?"

"Yeah."

"Weird Time Shit. Now stop asking me questions and just drive me and Jade back to the mansion."

Dave the driver shrugged his shoulders and opened the back door for Jade and his boss.

The limo got moving and in the back, Jade nestled up next to Don and fell asleep. Don stroked her hair and watched the city roll by through the tinted, reinforced windows.

Eventually they reached the Strider Mansion and Don opened the door himself and escorted Jade up to the headquarters of the Strider Mafia. The various paradox Daves that hung out at the mansion had walked outside to see their leader coming back to reclaim his post.

One of them came running up to Don and hugged him, "Oh thank fucking god you're back!"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm the one you named Don when you left three days ago and I've gotten six death threats and had to kill five assassins! Goddammit I'm not a permanent, I'm doomed. I named someone else Don and they had a fucking heart attack! Take the title back! Please!"

"Calm down, that's why I'm back. I'm the fucking Don again."

"Fucking finally...wait, why do you look like shit and why is Jade alive?"

"Weird Time Shit."

"Oh. Well, welcome back Boss. What's gonna happen now?"

Don just continued on past the worried clone and into the mansion, pulling Jade along behind him. He ignored all of the questions as he lead her up to his suite, closing and locking the door behind them.

He faced her and kissed her again. They were caught up in the moment of relief, bowing to their passions. Don started to undo the buttons on Jade's blouse with one hand, allowing the other to run through her soft hair.

Two buttons up, there was a soft cough in the room.

"AHEM."

Don froze in terror as Jade started to laugh, "Gotta put a ring on it Don before you get what you want."

"I'm trying to think if I want it if there's gonna be a creepy old pervert watching us from the Afterlife."

"DON!"

He smiled at her, "Don't worry Jade," Don leaned in close to whisper in her ear, "Will you if I ask?"

Jade blushed vibrantly, "Of course you fuckass. I'll say yes."

Don looked around the room, "Is that good enough for you you fat old dead fuck?" The two stopped and listened.

"HONEYMOON."

"Dammit, well are you gonna hang around here all the time or is this just a warning?"

There was no response. Don grimaced, he just knew he was gonna wake up every morning with a glowing face over his bed. Just watching him.

"Don't worry Don, Grandpa won't bother us too much."

That didn't help Don's concerns.

There was a knock at the door.

Don sighed and moved away from Jade.

The knocking repeated itself, louder and more persistent.

"Hold your fucking horses, I'm answering the damned door-"

Don had just reached the door, but was thrown back when the slammed open, destroying the frame. Don tumbled backwards.

He started to pick himself up, but a boot slammed itself into his gut and he gasped as the air was knocked from his lungs.

"What the fuck happened to you, you paradox piece of shit?"

Don rolled as the boot came for his gut again. He rolled to his feet and looked in shock at his attacker.

CrowBro. Alpha Dave.

Dave glared through the open visor at Don and then at Jade.

"What the fuck is going on here? Why is your voice different, why do you look like shit and why is Jade FUCKING ALIVE?!"

Dave roared the last bit as he pointed at the woman he knew should have been a corpse rotting away in a morgue at Fort Skaian.

"I'm no longer you, I spent two years according to my view traveling the world and I went into the Afterlife to get her back."

Dave stalked up to Don and they glared at each other, "How the fuck did you do that?" "I made a deal with the King-," Don dodged backwards as Dave took a swing for him. He hopped back a couple of steps, trying to get some room between him and his younger self.

"YOU DID WHAT?"

"Woah man, you're losing your cool. Where's the cool, calm Dave who never lets his emotions get away from him?"

Dave's eyes twitched violently...oh shit, what was going on?

"I should have known taking those damned turntables would become a fucking mistake. Can't have other Daves running around. They'll either end up making fools of themselves, or they'll suck up all the available cool, making me lose mine."

"That's some fucked up thinking bro."

Dave's eyes flared, he pulled his sword and charged Don.

"DON'T YOU FUCKING MENTION HIM YOU SHIT!!!"

Dave charged forward, but Don surprised him by pulling out a large knife, parrying the blow. Dave tumbled out of the way as the blade then went for his arm.

Jade moved out of the room, trying to find help.

Not that she would find any.

This was a fight that had been brewing for some time.

Dave and Don had come to hate each other.

It was inevitable that they were going to come to blows.

Besides, the paradox clones wouldn't stand a chance.

Doomed and all that weighed heavily on their minds as they thought about standing up to either the Alpha Dave or their Boss.

Don and Dave meanwhile had disarmed each other and had grappled with each other, rolling around the room. Occasionally one or the other would throw his opponent off before starting the grapple again.

"I'm going to enjoy this."

"Why?"

"Because I've needed to remove the man who betrayed what Bro taught me. You've forsaken everything he did for me."

"Us. It's us now. I'm no longer you. I was, but now I'm someone else."

Dave managed to get his leg up underneath Don and tossed his clone heavily to the ground. Don winced as something broke. Dave retrieved his blade and came back to Don.

"No."

He raised the blade above his head.

"There's only me. And I-"

Don looked up when Dave stopped talking. The blade was still raised, but the grip holding it was loose. Don rolled away as the sword fell from CrowBro's hands and lodged itself into the floor.

Don propped himself up and looked at Dave.

The man in the superhero get up was staring straight ahead. His eyes somewhat crossed. A very confused look was going across his face.

Don looked down and noticed that Dave was grasping something over his crotch.

A beanbag?

Don looked at the doorway and saw Jade staring there, furiously glaring at Dave, a shotgun in her hands. She cocked the gun and leveled it at Dave's head.

"This round is not a non-lethal round. If you want to live, get the fuck out of here. I...I don't want to see you again..."

Dave composed himself and glared at the two in front of him. He snorted and walked out of the Strider Mansion.

Don looked at Jade and smiled, "Well that was unexpected. You okay?"

Jade smiled at him, wiped some tears from her face and nodded.

Don layed back down on the floor and winced as he prodded his chest.

"Damn, this was really fucked up."

Jade walked over to Don, plopped down next to him on the debris-strewn floor and smiled at the man she loved.

"You're telling me, I was dead this time yesterday."

She leaned down and kissed him, Don winced in pain.

"Now all that needs to happen is to get you patched up and..."

"And what?"

Jade stuck out her left hand and looked at it, "And I want a big diamond engagement ring."

"Meow Meow Meow" by Wigmund

The majestic lioness watched her mate sleep. He had a busy night out cavorting with his friends, drinking and rabble-rousing.

He should have known better, he always felt like shit the next day and would take it out on those he cared about. Then he would feel bad and find ways to apologize for it. The lioness had come to enjoy the ways her mate liked to apologize to her recently.

The lioness reached up onto the bed her mate was resting upon and pawed his horns. All she got was a mumbled grunt and her mate swatted away her paw. The lioness frowned and tried to tickle his ears, but he just wrapped his head up in the blankets and started to snore loudly.

The lioness sat back on her haunches and huffed pitifully, she wanted to play but her mate just wanted to sleep. Her mate hardly ever wanted to do what she wanted to do. He was always that way, even when they first met up so long ago.

...15 years ago...

The little cub pushed on the brave huntress who had protected her from the scary green light and noise. But the huntress was no longer moving and she started to stink.

The little cub tried to keep the rats away but they were so big and scary and their red eyes frightened her. So she hid as they would bite the huntress and the little cub would cry herself to sleep, covering herself with a big green coat she had found and hoping her blue kitty doll would protect her.

The little cub would wander the scary streets trying to find food, but the screaming and angry people would always send her back to her huntress who had stopped moving a long time ago.

Eventually the little cub gave up hope.

She couldn't move.

She was so hungry.

She was so thirsty.

But she didn't know what to do.

The little cub cried in agony as she lay there in the dark and scary alleyway as newspapers and other stuff was blown over her. She was too weak to dig herself out.

She didn't care anymore.

But then someone stepped on her.

She tried to hiss at the stranger, but all she muster was a pathetic ...mew...

The stranger yelled something at her and then left. She just lay there and wondered when it would stop hurting.

Then she heard footsteps again, the stranger was back.

He shoved something into her mouth.

Food.

Water.

He was helping her.

The little cub looked up at her savior and saw a boy.

She tried to smile and say something, "...thank you..."

After he fed her, the brave hero picked up the little cub on his back, retrieved her blue kitty doll and took them with him.

The little cub nestled up on his back and listened to his breathing as her hero carried her away from the dark alleyway.

She fell asleep and dreamed wonderful dreams for the first time in a long time.

...10 years ago...

The little lioness trailed behind her Karkitty as they ran away from the mean old shopkeeper who didn't want to share his food with the poor starving kids. Mean old man, they were so poor and hungry, he should have been happy to help them.

But he was like everyone else. They didn't want to help Karkitty and the little lioness. So Karkitty had to steal and lie and cheat to help his little lioness friend.

He must love her so much she thought. He was so kind and protective, it made her happy whenever he was near her.

But right now they had to hide or they would be sent back to the bad place.

The bad place that tried to split them up and send them to homes where there were bad people who did bad things to the children who survived the Disaster. The little lioness was forced to sacrifice her blue kitty doll so she could have armor to protect herself from the bad things. Now she really was the lioness and nothing could hurt her anymore.

Eventually, Karkitty told her that it was alright to move on, so they left the dark alleyway and went down another street.

A street where something bad had happened.

The lioness could smell all the blood in the air. It made her nose hurt and her stomach sick.

She watched her brave Karkitty walk into the mess to help someone in the middle of it.

It was a boy. A troll boy about Karkitty's age. He was sitting all curled up in the middle of the mess, just shivering.

The lioness paced along the edge of the nasty puddle as she watched her brave protector find yet another to protect.

He was such a great guy.

The lioness bound after Karkitty and the boy she would later find out was named 'Gamzee' as they left the scary street.

The lioness loved to make new friends.

...5 years ago...

The lioness was so embarrassed! She was starting to have weird dreams involving her and Karkitty. The dreams that made it hard to look at him the next morning. Oh my, the lioness was so embarrassed about those dreams...but she liked them too.

Now the lioness needed to find a way to tell Karkitty about these strange feelings she had without telling him directly...maybe she could paint something to show him. The lioness eventually found some strawberry jam and she painted her first shipping wall. Right at the top of it was her and Karkitty.

Karkitty saw it the next morning and yelled at the lioness. She didn't understand why he was so upset about it.

Maybe she needed to make him realize her feelings for him some other way. Maybe she should paint something on the wall to show him her thoughts about the various relationships going on involving the lioness and her Karkitty.

...3 years ago...

Karkitty found someone who would help him and his friends! The lioness was so happy! And their new friend even gave Karkitty a gift for the lioness, a special ring. Now the lioness could become a Kitty Car!

Beep Beep Meow!

For some reason Karkitty didn't like the joke, but the lioness didn't care. Later the lioness would admit that she was frightened of their new friend. He didn't seem right. Something was wrong with him. Plus he made her Karkitty nervous.

But something good did come from their new jobs, the lioness found out she liked to

be a Cat Burglar. She loved those little fuzzy-wuzzies soooo much! She just had to take them all home with her.

Pity it made Karkitty angry and their new home started to smell funny.

...1 year ago...

The lioness was always so scared when her Karkitty put on the costume and went out to fight the bad people that hurt others. But she knew he'd always come back to her safe and sound.

Nothing bad could happen to any member of the Karkat Gang as long as they were all together.

...2 months ago...

The lioness was so scared and she hurt so much. Why did the new lady hurt her on her birthday? Why?

The lioness clutched the nasty cut she had and curled up in the dirty alleyway and cried as she heard the mean lady and Karkitty start arguing with each other.

Then the mean lady tripped over the lioness and made her hurt even more.

Why was she doing this to the lioness? The lioness had never done anything to hurt the lady.

Later the lioness would be helped by the cops that always gave her and her friends such a hard time. They sounded so concerned about the lioness, she was so happy.

That night in the hospital, the mean lady would visit the lioness again. This time she brought the lioness a gift and apologized to the lioness. She didn't mean to hurt them, she was just mistaken.

The lioness wanted to forgive her until she saw the lady kiss her Karkitty.

Fuck the Magpie.

...1 month ago...

The lioness was having so much fun with Karkitty and Gamzee at the Cod Place. Mr. Bard was so nice to them.

The lioness was enjoying her chocolate milkshake that Mr. Bard always made for her. No one else got chocolate milkshakes at the Cod Place. Only the lioness got those.

Bad things would happen if she got to taste the regular drinks Mr. Bard served at his bar.

Everything was going great, the lioness was telling Karkitty about how much she wanted to see the zoo the next day when the bitch showed up again.

The lioness didn't like that.

So she ordered the Swamp Wizard and then everything went black.

The lioness woke up the next morning wondering why she was in strange clothes and smelled like pudding. Karkitty and Gamzee wouldn't tell her what happened. But Karkitty kept looking at her in a strange way since then.

The lioness felt funny inside.

Then Karkitty took the lioness to the zoo and they had so much fun together. They looked at the lemurs and the big cats (which scared the bravest lioness though she wouldn't admit it) and all the other things there. Eventually they had to go home, but Karkitty decided that it was better for them to walk back.

So the lioness and Karkitty talked about all the fun things they did that day and other things. Karkitty admitted stuff to the lioness, feelings and emotions and stuff. The lioness was so astonished to hear her Karkitty talk like that, but she always knew what to say to make him feel better.

He seemed to like that.

Then they got home and Karkitty kissed her.

The lioness was rather happy.

...The Purrfect Moment...

Now the lioness had the best boyfriend in the world. That is, when he was awake and not suffering a hangover because he did silly things the previous night. She had tried to wake him up but he just covered his head and started to snore.

The lioness thought and thought about the best way to wake her Karkitty up when she came up with a brilliant idea.

She crawled up onto the bed next to her Karkitty and hugged him.

He shrugged and tried to squirm away from her, but she wouldn't let him.

She nuzzled close to where his ear would be and breathed heavily, ":33 < Karkitty?"
"mzzzfuckitmzz?"

":?? < Mrrrrr?"

"mrghrfzzz..."

"X33 < I want to have a baby."

At first Karkitty did nothing. He just stayed in his curled up position facing the wall in his tiny bedroom.

But then, he suddenly tried to sit upright. Unfortunately he was laying on his side and

was next to the wall. Nepeta jumped back in surprise as he jerked forward, slammed his head into the wall hard enough to knock the plaster off. Karkat then rolled back, clutching his forehead in pain and looked up at Nepeta.

"YOU FUCKING WHAT!?"

"Life's A Carnival" by Wigmund

The painted troll happened to be sleeping on the couch again, sleeping off the side effects of his sopor pies, when the door to Karkat's bedroom slammed open and Nepeta came charging out on all fours. Gamzee sat upright and watched his little kitty friend hide behind the arm rest of the couch, watching the door to the room she just fled from. Gamzee turned to see Karkat storm out, clad only in boxers, and started yelling at Nepeta.

Gamzee's eyebrows raised. This wasn't Karkat's usual "I YELL AT THE WORLD BECAUSE I'M ALWAYS TIGHTLY WOUND" hollering, this was something worse.

And Nepeta was receiving the full force of it.

Nepeta's eyes widened, then filled with tears and finally she ran off to her room slamming the door behind her.

Karkat froze, ran to Nepeta's door and started to knock on it and quietly asking that she open the door.

He started to apologize repeatedly.

Gamzee noticed the red spots appearing on the floor and decided that now would be an excellent time to be in his own room. Give the two some additional space, and the couch if they needed it.

Gamzee patted Karkat on the back as he passed the sobbing, apologetic troll and entered the room that Karkat and Nepeta considered Gamzee's.

In reality, it was the Old Goat's.

Gamzee opened the door and slide inside, always careful to not let the others see inside. They never tried to peek. They knew that this was his sanctum, a place for him to escape in ways that the sopor and other mind-altering substances didn't let him. It was a place he could remember the only times he was happy as a child.

His grandfather's study.

...15 years ago, during the aftermath of the Green Sun Disaster...

The Old Goat, Enki Makara, Grand Patron of the House Makara, patted the young troll on his head as he tried to comfort the boy. But he knew that nothing was going to get Gamzee to calm down now.

The Old Goat's worthless son was downstairs yelling at his equally worthless wife. They were both drunk again, not a big surprise. Not that they would have done anything to comfort Gamzee even if they were sober.

"I'm sorry my Kid, shall we go to my study?" Enki looked down at Gamzee who was

busy wiping his runny nose on his grandfather's shirt. Enki smiled at the boy he loved more than his own children looked up at him and nodded.

Enki carried Gamzee across the grand mansion and to his private wing. They entered a small room and Gamzee's teary eyes widened in wonder at the sights that were in the his grandfather's study. Compared to the rest of the mansion, Enki's personal study was a tiny room, but it was the one place where he kept his prized collection of books, journals and memorabilia that he had gathered as a younger troll traveling the world.

Gamzee loved his grandfather's suite. He loved hearing the Old Goat's tales of the various brush wars he witnessed long ago and about the spy drama that occurred between the remnants of the Troll Empire and the Union. Enki loved telling Gamzee these stories and showing the impressionable child his study.

It was obvious Gamzee was a bright child, exceptionally bright despite what his mother and father yelled at him whenever he was near them.

Enki wanted to make sure that Gamzee has the best future possible, no matter what.

...10 years ago...

"Old Goat, what is wrong with that girl over there?"

Gamzee pulled on his grandfather's coat tails and pointed at the strange girl that was approaching their group. Apparently, Gamzee's parents were at the point of drunkenness where they weren't fighting and were willing to go attend a movie premeire. Now that the movie was over, the Makaras were making their way back to the restaurant they had reservations at for the rest of the evening.

That was until the Old Goat realized what was approaching them.

"Gamzee, keep away from her!" The Old Goat grabbed Gamzee and motioned to his son and daughter-in-law that they should follow him.

Gamzee was confused and terrified.

That fear got worse when he saw the girl come bounding after them on all fours, growling and snarling like a beast.

His mother was the first one to fall to the savage attack.

The Old Goat hid Gamzee behind a dumpster and went back to join his son in attempting to fend off their attacker.

But all that happened was that Gamzee witnessed his family being torn to shreds in front of him.

Then the beast started to sniff around again.

It was looking for him.

Gamzee covered his mouth and choked back the bleating sobs he wanted to unleash. He wanted to cry for his grandfather, but if he did, she would find him.

The blood-soaked girl was so close, he could see her glowing jade eyes.

Eyes he would never forget.

She gave up on searching for him and returned to the corpses she had created and began to feed.

Gamzee watched in terror. He watched the demon feed on his former family. He watched the demon suddenly freeze up and stare off into space. He watched as some blonde human girl ran up to her and led her off somewhere. He watched himself slowly crawl out from behind the dumpster and curl up in the middle of the bloody mess that had been his family. He watched some strange boy walk up to him hours later and ask what was wrong, what had happened.

Gamzee grabbed onto the boy and didn't let go. He couldn't. He didn't want to.

Eventually the troll pulled himself free and took Gamzee with him and a young girl troll to be with them.

Gamzee had found new friends. He would come to understand that he had found a new family.

Eventually, he would develop an addiction to sopor and other mind-altering drugs to force himself to forget what had happened, to repress the overwhelming memories of the past, to stop his mind from racing.

Also, Gamzee would lead Karkat and Nepeta on their first robbery.

A robbery of his old home.

They would take some of his parent's jewelry and trinkets. Stuff that would fetch a nice price so they wouldn't starve anytime soon, Gamzee looted his grandfather's study and hid it away.

...3 years ago...

Gamzee calmly listened to Karkat explaining their new circumstances to Nepeta.

They had an employer now? And it was Mr. Pupa?

Gamzee knew that was some deep shit, but he didn't let on. He was the calming force within the Karkat Gang. He was the one that kept Karkat and Nepeta from being driven insane by the life they lived.

And now it looked like he had more work to do.

But at least they were getting a permanent place to stay. A rather decent apartment by their standards.

Karkat let Nepeta and Gamzee pick their rooms first. Nepeta dived into the largest bedroom and claimed it. Gamzee walked into the secondary bedroom and realized it was the same size as his grandfather's study. He had to have it.

Karkat let them take the bedrooms. When they asked him where he would sleep, he pointed out that the utility closet had plenty of room for a small dresser and a cot. He didn't need that much room and besides, they probably needed the space more than he did.

Gamzee really wished he could repay Karkat for all of the sacrifices the small man took upon himself. It was amazing how much the perpetually angry troll shouldered to protect those he considered his family and how much he gave to ensure that they were happy before himself.

...2 years ago...

Gamzee loved the free medical clinic that operated in The Settlements. They always helped him with his sopor addiction.

Help satisfy it that is.

They had realized that Gamzee was one of the unfortunate few who needed to consume the stuff to suppress the overwhelming storm of emotions that raged within himself and his hyperdrive mind, something that, if left unchecked, would burn him out. So they supplied the painted troll with his medical needs and looked the other way whenever he stopped by.

Gamzee really liked that.

Well, that was until he ran into the daughter of the couple running the place.

It was her.

It was fucking her.

Gamzee freaked out the first time he ran into her. He screamed in terror because he trapped in the sopor supply closet and she was blocking the only way out.

He screamed that he didn't want to be eaten. Not like his family. He started to sob in terror.

She looked at him in shock, and then she started to cry when she realized what he was screaming about.

It took her hours to calm Gamzee down. Her parents had to help her.

But they calmed the terrified troll down.

And she explained what had happened and apologized profusely for it.

Gamzee said that he accepted her explanation, but he made sure to never visit the place when she was there. Thankfully she only spent certain days of the week at the clinic.

...6 months ago...

Oh god, why now?

Gamzee felt the sopor cloud draining away.

Why now? Why now when the Felt were after the Gang for some reason?

Oh god, please stop the noise. It hurts

Please stop it Old Goat. Please make the pain and screaming go away grandfather.

...1 month ago...

Gamzee was enjoying this night way too much.

Who knew that Karkat was so insecure when it came to his relationships with women. Who knew that he was so blind to the signs Nepeta had been throwing at him since the time Gamzee had joined their group 10 years ago.

Gamzee hid in his room, the recreation of his grandfather's study now that he had gathered all of the stuff he looted from the old study, to give Karkat and Nepeta some space.

Pity he didn't have to hide there for long, Nepeta started to make a racket because Karkat had passed out on the couch. So Gamzee carried the small troll to his bed and covered him up. Gamzee honked in amusement when Nepeta curled up on top of her new boyfriend and passed out herself.

The next couple of days were just as exciting.

...Where We Again? Oh Yeah, The Present...

Gamzee sat in the Old Goat's old chair and read through several of his journals as he listened to Karkat sobbing at Nepeta's door, begging for her forgiveness.

Gamzee looked around the study and realized that, somehow, new books were being added. New items were popping up on the shelves and available desk space.

This was no longer truly his grandfather's suite.

It was slowly becoming his own.

He was his own Goat now.

Gamzee started to laugh when he realized that.

He stopped laughing when he heard the door to Nepeta's room open.

Gamzee walked out of his room just in time to see Karkat being dragged by Nepeta through the doorway, which quickly shut behind the bewildered man.

Good, it meant they were making up yet again. He would hate to see those two split up, they were quite wonderful together. Gamzee smiled to himself, now only if he could find that someone special out there.

But that could wait, he was in no rush.

Gamzee pulled out a bottle of faygo and the remnants of one of last night's sopor pies and settled down to enjoy another day's worth of bizarre children's programming.

But then the phone rang.

Shit, Karkat was the one who usually answered it. But he was occupied.

Gamzee stared at the phone and got up.

"Hello, this is Gamzee."

"Well hello there, my, uh, fine friend. I was just calling to, um, let you and your compatriots know that I have a job for you. Please come by my mansion as soon as you can."

"Oh fuck, uh, yes sir. Yeah, we'll fucking be there."

"That's good. I shall see you soon then."

And then Mr. Pupa hung up the phone on his end.

Gamzee just stared at the receiver in his hand.

Oh fuck, this wasn't good.

"Would You Kindly?, Part 1" by Wigmund

Karkat was thankful when Gamzee started pounding on the door to Nepeta's room. He was always uncomfortable when she pinned him down in the pile of stuffed animals she used as a bed and all those cats she insisted on burgling would crawl in her window and watch them hold onto each other.

Karkat pulled himself up, shook Nepeta off and opened the door to find a frightened Gamzee staring at him.

This couldn't be good.

"What the hell is wrong? Who called?" Karkat looked up at Gamzee and cocked an eyebrow. This couldn't be good, only a few things really rattled the perpetually stoned troll and at the top of the list was "Mr. Pupa, the motherfucker has a job for us. He wants us at his fucking place 'soon'." Karkat rubbed his face and growled, "Fuck fuck fuck, how soon did he say?" from the way Gamzee was reacting, he knew the answer before his friend told him, "As soon as possible."

Karkat ran from Nepeta's room and into his, quickly getting dressed, "Nepeta, get straightened. We've gotta go see the boss." Nepeta stalked out of her room and pouted at Karkat, "Do we have to? I wanted to just curl up with you all day Karkitty."

"I know, I know, but we need to keep the boss happy."

"Silly Mister Pupurr."

The trio quickly got ready and exited their apartment. Nepeta's horde of cats had taken over most of the building and several followed them past the greasy troll diner that existed several floors below the gang's apartment. They swarmed the dumpsters outside while the trio moved into the alleyway to get their ride ready.

"Do I get to be a cat car again?!" Nepeta hopped from foot to foot in excitement. Karkat sighed, "Dammit, yes, just transform already."

Nepeta clapped her hands and spun in place, "BEEP BEEP MEOW!" One moment, there was a smiling cat girl standing in the alleyway, the next there was a sub-compact car that looked like it had been attacked by cat fetishists.

"Goddamn I hate that, you don't have to say that whenever you use the ring Nepeta." "Beep?"

Karkat was getting into the driver's seat, "Don't start that up!"

"Beep beep."

Gamzee closed the passenger door and laughed when Karkat suddenly blushed, "What?! Why didn't you tell me your steering wheel was..." The angry red-blood pulled his hands off the wheel and glared at the dash, "Dammit Nepeta, just take us to Mr. Pupa's!"

"Beep beep beep meow meow!"

"And stop laughing at me you fucking crazy cat girl!"

"HoNk HoNk HoNk!"

"You can fucking stuff it as well you nook-sniffing sopor sucker!"

Both Gamzee and Nepeta kept on laughing as they sped off towards the Heights.

When they arrived at the mansion, the trio entered through the servant's entrance, Karkat left Gamzee and Nepeta in the kitchens and made his way to Mr. Pupa's suite.

He started to knock on the door, but wasn't surprised when the man waiting inside called for him to enter before his fist pulled back.

"Come on in Karkat. I have, uh, been waiting for you."

Karkat cringed and slowly opened the door to find his boss, the dreaded Mr. Pupa, standing in front of the massive windows that gave the criminal overlord an excellent view of Alternia City.

"Please, um, Mr. Vantas. Feel free to take a seat."

Karkat hesitantly walked in and took a seat in front of Pupa's desk and watched his boss continue to look out the window. Pupa stood there for what seemed like an eternity before turning around to face his primary 'employee'.

"I was rather, uh, disappointed when you so rudely tried to leave my good graces. But I am so happy that you reconsidered that plan."

"Yeah, whatever. What do you want?"

Pupa just smiled at Karkat, that horrifyingly dangerous smile he wore when he was being pushed and didn't like it.

A smile that said that its wearer would not even blink an eye when ordering everyone that the focus of the wearer's ire loved to be horrifically murdered.

"Now, now Mr. Vantas, let's not be harsh here. I just need you to perform a simple job for me." Pupa walked up to his desk and pushed a folded letter towards Karkat.

"What's this?" Karkat glared at the note as he picked it up.

"Instructions on what you should do after you and your cohorts are arrested in City Central and placed in the holding cells at the headquarters of the Alternia City Police Department."

Karkat nearly dropped the letter, "Wait, what are you talking about? I can't be arrested! They'll send me to the Veil! I...I-"

"Have nothing to, uh, worry about. Just open the note when you are placed in your cell and everything will become clear."

Pupa turned around and wandered over to the windows again, "Have a good day Mr. Vantas."

"Yeah, whatever," Karkat got up. He made it as far as the doors when he heard Mr. Pupa speak up again.

"One last thing Mr. Vantas," Mr. Pupa turned to look over his shoulder at Karkat, "Congratulations for the recent beginning of your deeper relationship with Miss Leijon. You two make such a, uh, wonderful couple."

Karkat's eyes widened as he quickly left Mr. Pupa's suite and quickly made his way

back to Gamzee and Nepeta. He found them in a staff break room talking to someone who looked very familiar. They had cups of soda in front of them and some snack food. They were all laughing. Nepeta spotted Karkat entering the room and waved at him, "Hey there Karkitty! Have you met Mr. Pupurr's new girlfurrend?"

Karkat stopped, "What girlfriend? I thought he was married to that Vriska bitch."

Everything froze as the unknown woman glared at him. Karkat carefully looked her over, making special note of her curled horns.

Wait, he's seen horns like that before. But the eyes that were looking at him were nothing like the emotionless robotic ones he had faced so many times before, or the lively ones he remembered before that.

"Oh, um, hello. Sorry about that."

The eyes flashed and they returned to being lively, caring and cheerful, "Oh it's no problem. I'll assume that you are Karkat."

Karkat nodded as Aradia got up and walked towards him.

"Nepeta told me so much about you. She is a lucky woman to have a man like you. But I have to go and it looks my love has a task for you three that requires your attention." Aradia nodded to everyone in the room, "Good luck you three."

She glared at Karkat as she passed him and growled under her breath, "You will need it."

Karkat went pale until Aradia was completely out of sight, he then rounded up his fellow gang members and the three left Mr. Pupa's mansion.

Gamzee watched Karkat fidget nervously as they headed downtown.

"So what does our motherfucking boss want us to do?"

"Meow?"

"Yeah, what the fucking kitty car said. Something's under your skin?"

Karkat glanced over at Gamzee and at the dash of Nepecar, "We need to get ourselves arrested and jailed at APD HQ."

The car screeched to a halt and Gamzee stared at Karkat in disbelief, "HONK! What the fuck!"

"It's part of Pupa's plan, once we're jailed there, I'm to open this note and it'll tell us what to do."

"Beep beep meow?"

"Uh...fuck, well shit."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly."

Gamzee rubbed a hand through his hair, retrieving a faygo from his thick locks, "Well shit, if we need to get arrested, we might as well have fun causing fucking chaos."

Karkat glanced over at his buddy and bumped fists with him, "Can't say that I disagree, let's make those fucking flat-footed bulge suckers remember this."

Karkat tapped the gas pedal which had no function, prompting Nepeta to purr. The car kicked into high gear and they speed off into City Central.

Several hours later, the trio were dragged into the headquarters of the Alternia City Police Department. The desk officer was glaring at the shitty mural that was painted on one wall of the entry hall. It was obvious he hated it.

Karkat started up his usual tirade that he and his friends had been up to nothing despite the ruins they left several downtown shops in. The squabbling was going fine until Nepeta piped up about wanting to share a cell with him.

"What agaiin? You guyth thtiill hooked up?"

"Of course. I'll never leave my Karkitty!"

Karkat screamed in frustration, prompting Officer Captor to laugh at him.

Fucking four-horned lispy freak.

"Would You Kindly?, Part 2" by Wigmund

"So, yeah. What does Mr. Pupa's fucking note say we should do now?"

"Yeah, I don't like it here. I'm afraid that the mean purrllice will take my Karkitty away."

Karkat glared at his two cohorts as he dug through his pockets, searching for the thick note Mr. Pupa had given him before instructing Karkat to get himself arrested. Thankfully, the stupid fuck in charge of patting him down had missed the note amongst other things in his pockets. Fucking idiotic police force.

He found the note and pulled it out. It seemed to be a mass of folded together pieces of paper that formed a puzzle, requiring a page to be flipped to proceed further in at all. Karkat looked at the first note on what he assumed was the top of the mass:

Would you kindly escape the prison cell.

May I suggest the creation of a distraction to secure your means of egress.

Karkat's eye twitched, "Well isn't that just fucking great. Mr. Pupa wants us to escape and he kindly suggests we create a distraction to get out of here," he glanced over to Gamzee and Nepeta, "Well, you two have any suggestions?"

"Fuck if I know. Do you have any ideas Little Kitty?"

A wide lecherous grin split Nepeta's face, "I could make out with Karkitty. That always distracts me." Karkat went pale as Nepeta came up and hugged him, purring all the while.

"But it won't fucking distract the guards. Sit down," Karkat pushed Nepeta away, who went back to the bench frowning. He walked up to the cell bars and looked up and down the corridor as best as he could. Dammit, he couldn't see anything that would come in handy.

It was then that the idiots in the next cell decided it was a great time to pipe up, "Do you hear that Bro? Those guys need a distaction!"

"How high would you need to be for one of those Jeff?"

"I don't know, but I imagine it was higher than that time I put jelly on my hot dog!"

Karkat immediately tuned them out. Fucking drug-pushing idiots.

He looked at the note bundle, "Let's see if the fucking asshole left us any suggestions." Karkat began to flip the note over to see the second command, but a loose piece of paper fell to the ground. Karkat picked up the note.

I would suggest that you do not jump ahead while reading these carefully planned commands that I have prepared for you and your cohorts, Mr. Vantas. I have calculated all of the possible variables to the highest degree and if you look ahead, it would throw those calculations and preparations off. I would be most disappointed if you did not heed this warning.

Karkat went pale. He leaned against the cell bars as he looked around for a way to create a distraction so they could find a way to escape.

Unfortunately, he met the gaze of the insane homeless man who resided in the cell across from them.

"THE STORY HAS BECOME CORRUPT. A HARD RESET IS NEEDED. THE BARD OF RAGE HAS NOT-"

"YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP ABOUT GAMZEE! HE'S NOT A FUCKING PSYCHOPATH!"

"BUT THE STORY IS NOT RIGHT! FLUSHED FEELINGS ARE BEING RETURNED!"

The homeless man jabbed a finger at Nepeta, who flinched and ran to hide behind Karkat. She always hated meeting this guy. He seemed to delight in tormenting her.

Wait...

Karkat pulled Nepeta around so he could look at her while still watching the coat-wearing hobo.

"You're gonna enjoy this."

"What? I-"

She was cut off when Karkat kissed her. That set the hobo off.

"STOP THAT! THIS IS STUPID!" He continued screaming and raging as Karkat could hear foot steps quickly approaching them from down the hallway. Before the cop arrived, Karkat pushed Nepeta away so the flat foot wouldn't blame them for riling up the loon.

"What the fuck is your problem Andrew?"

"THE STORY NEEDS TO BE FIXED! SOMEONE NEEDS TO TRIGGER THE SCRATCH AND RESET IT ALL!"

The cop approached the hobo to calm him down, but was pushed back into the bars of the Karkat Gang's cell when Andrew lunged at him, still screaming about how everything was wrong.

"Oh that's fucking it!" The cop stormed off, only to return with a fire extinguisher. He sprayed Andrew down until the hobo cowered in the corner of his cell, hiding beneath his great green coat.

"Fuck you, you goddamned loon," The cop slammed down the now empty fire extinguisher and stormed off.

Karkat waited until he couldn't hear the man's foot steps and turned towards Gamzee.

Gamzee looked up at Karkat and Nepeta, smiling at them, "Fucking miracles." He raised a hand, flashing the keys he somehow picked from the cop's waistband. He

tossed the keys to Karkat.

"Alright guys, let's get the fuck out of here."

Karkat opened the cell door and the trio left down the hall, heading down towards what they assumed was a maintenance closet to hide for a moment.

"Karkitty...what are we going to do now? The cops will be so angry with us if they found out we are doing this."

"It's alright Nepeta, it's all part of Pupa's plan. In fact, let's see what he has to say next."

Karkat flipped over the page to read the next note in Pupa's packet.

"Oh goddammit, how did you know?!"

"Would You Kindly?, Part 3" by Wigmund

"Oh goddammit, how did you know?!"

Karkat stared at the next entry of the notes Mr. Pupa had given him. Nepeta and Gamzee stared at their leader and best friend, confused and somewhat frightened.

"What is wrong Karkitty? What does Mr. Pupurr tell us to do next?" Gamzee nodded as she spoke, trying to nudge Karkat out of his enraged silence. Karkat looked at his two companions and then back at the note from their horrible, terrifying boss. He put the note away and started to look around the supply closet they were hiding in.

"The fucker said there are three janitor's suits in here that we should wear if we want to continue this fucking plot."

"Fucking miracles."

"I really fucking doubt that," Karkat muttered as he rummaged through the piles of dirty towels, cleaning supplies and random junk the cleaning crews of the APD headquarters building would stash in this closet.

At one point Karkat pulled back with a large bag of warm liquid in a clear plastic bag, "What the fuck is this?" He opened a valve and took a sniff...

Blood, specifically troll blood mixed with something else.

Karkat threw the bag as hard as he could against a back wall, splattering its contents across a good portion of the room. Nepeta and Gamzee jerked back, gave their boss more worried looks and then went back to digging through the junk to find what Mr. Pupa had left for them. Nepeta found the three suits.

Splattered with the blood Karkat had thrown earlier.

"Oh noooo, there's blood on our costumes!" Nepeta stared at Karkat with tears in her eyes.

"We can clean this shit off, we're in a cleaning supply closet. Surely the fucking janitors have something to remove bloodstains. I mean, how else can the fucking cops' keep their uniforms so clean or remove shit from the carpets?"

Karkat pulled up a couple of bottles of cleaning solutions, dumped them into a bucket (noting Gamzee's look of disgust) and gagged when they fumed up. He took some towels, dipped them into the solution and sighed in relief when they wiped away the blood on the uniforms. He handed a uniform each to Gamzee and Nepeta, telling them to get dressed.

Karkat and Gamzee got into the uniforms without difficulty, but Nepeta forced them to turn around while she got into hers.

"Fur modesty!"

"Nepeta...I've already seen you-," Karkat was quickly silenced as Gamzee grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to look at a wall. "Give the motherfucking kitty her

space my best fucking friend." Karkat glanced up at Gamzee who was wearing a very large, very knowing smile on his painted face. Dammit.

"The face paint has to go Gamzee."

Gamzee slouched as the words entered his rather thick head. He grabbed a nearby moist towel and removed the face paint he always wore. "Fucking shit man. Not cool at all. But I guess I fucking understand, can't be fucking in disguise wearing a big sign telling all the motherfuckers who I am. Shit, the fucking towel smells like fucking shit. Fuck."

Eventually Nepeta announced she was ready and the three grabbed some cleaning equipment to complete their ruse and left the closet. Karkat led them out of the jail wing, ignoring the hateful glare from one of the cells, and past the very cop that was supposed to make sure they didn't get up to shenanigans like this.

"Hey janitors! I've heard they've got some kind of mess up in the offices. Fucking bat can't keep from making a mess up there."

Karkat froze for a bit, pulled his cap lower over his face and nodded. The three walked up to the elevators in the main lobby and called for one.

They entered the elevator when it opened, only noticing after the doors closed that someone else was already in there.

"To which floor are you three going?"

Gamzee froze in absolute terror. Karkat glanced up at the now unpainted clown and back at the person in the car with them. Oh fuck, it was the nurse from the clinic they used all the time. She'd see through these terrible disguises in no time.

But she just looked at them, slightly bored with her fingers hovering over the buttons.

"Um...uh, we're going up to the main offices..."

Kanaya sighed, "Same level I'm going to then." She pushed a button to close the doors and the elevator continued its upwards journey. Several floors went by in silence before the doors opened up again and the jade-blood exited the car. "Here we are, I imagine that your services are need in the interrogation room. Apparently Officer Pyrope left a mess in there when she got a little enthusiastic with a suspect."

The nurse pointed down the hallway in one direction as she continued down the other. The trio exited the elevator and went in the direction Kanaya indicated. Karkat glanced over his shoulder and noticed Kanaya shaking her head as she walked away from them. Fuck...did she see through their disguises? Is she going to fucking tell a cop?

Karkat glanced up at Gamzee and noticed that the troll was paler than his usual face paint, "Gamzee - are you fucking okay?" Gamzee nodded silently, but still had the gaze of terror plastered across his face. Karkat wanted to find out what was terrifying the

guy, but right now they had to find out what Pupa wanted them to do next.

They continued down the halls and eventually made their way to the interrogation rooms. They opened the doors and ducked inside.

There was a mess and a couple of new dents that Karkat hadn't seen since the last time he was in here. The three looked around and made sure that the cops had left the recording equipment disconnected before Karkat pulled out the note.

"Let's see what our fucking boss wants us to do next," He flipped a couple of pages and found the following:

Would you kindly make your way to the offices of Police Commissioner Armstrong Righteous.

I shall assume you are currently on the Main Office Level of the Headquarters. The Commissioner's office is on the opposite side of the building from the Interrogation Rooms.

"Fucking creepy. How does he know where we are?"

"He's a fucking smart ass Gamzee, who the fuck cares. Now let's get this shit cleaned up before a cop gets curious and make our way to that damned office."

The three left the room spotless and started across the offices to where Mr. Pupa wanted them next. They worriedly walked past hordes of officers, detectives and others as their journey continued. All the while Nepeta would whimper slightly whenever a cop would brush too close to her.

Karkat wanted to gut a couple of the blue fuckers when they whistled and stared at her ass with lecherous grins on their faces. He noted who they were for later. Patrol officers. He'd be able to find them.

But there was a bigger problem ahead of them. A very familiar pair was approaching them from down the hall.

"Officer Appleberry, it smells like the janitors have been busy wiping up my little mistake."

"Hehehehehe"

"Would You Kindly?, Part 4" by Wigmund

The trio froze when the all too dreadfully familiar laughter drifted towards them along with the equally familiar sociopathic toothy grin.

"Did you three have fun cleaning up my little 'accident'?" Terezi beamed at the disguised Karkat gang as she looped an arm around her beleaguered squad partner's neck. He sighed heavily and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Karkat started to yammer something but Officers Pyrope and Captor swept by them, Terezi still gazing straight ahead, but Sollux gave the three a slightly confused glance.

"Bluh, I hate those chemicals you guys use," Terezi muttered in passing, "Always messes with my nose."

Karkat glanced behind himself to watch the duo round a corner in the hall and disappear from sight before breathing a sigh of relief. Nepeta's eyes were as large as plates and Gamzee had pulled his hat down so low that his nose was barely visible.

"Too fucking close guys, too fucking close."

He nudged his partners and they continued on towards the Commissioner's office. Avoiding other officers whenever possible, bolting past an office containing a worried-looking DOOF officer who was wiping his sweaty brow with a overly damp towel and stopping only briefly to listen in on some rather juicy banter emanating from the HQ's dispatch office. Nepeta's eyes lit up as she listened in there.

"...oh my..."

"Fucking hell no Nep, we need to keep going."

After what seemed like an eternity to Karkat, they reached the Commissioner's Office. The overly decorated door boasted a large bronze plaque that proclaimed:

OFFICE OF ALTERNIA CITY POLICE COMMISSIONER
ARMSTRONG RIGHTEOUS

"Guess this is the motherfucking right place my best fucking friend," Gamzee's glazed gaze shifted from the door to Karkat. Karkat glared at his high friend and then opened the door.

They made their way into the office but were shocked when they found themselves face to face with the Commissioner himself.

Who was busy making paper hats for himself. A particularly majestic example of which he was currently wearing upon his carapaced head.

"Who intrudes into my office? This is a most flagrant violation of office policy! I should have you three punished! Who are you that would intrude upon my jurisdiction?" Righteous proclaimed as he pointed an overly long baton at the three and gestured

wildly with his free hand, *"I will have you three thrown to the judges! They will relish the chance to punish violators of the Alternia City Police Headquarters Code of Conduct!"*

He continued rambling, pointing and occasionally stomping on the desk, causing the clutter gathered upon its surface to jump and bounce about. That is, the clutter he hadn't kicked to the ground before the Karkat Gang entered his domain.

Nepeta was the first to speak up, *"Um, Mister Commissipurr, we are the cleaning crew. We're here to clean your office."*

Commissioner Righteous stopped, *"Oh, janitorial services. Your intrusion is forgiven then."* He jumped down from the desk and started to head out of his office. As he was leaving he turned to face the three, *"But is it not Wilma Quiche that usually performs the weekly janitorial duties on the last workday of the week of my office?"*

Karkat and Gamzee looked at Nepeta, who looked up at them and then back to the curious Dersite, *"Oh...she happened to be sick this week. Terrible case of infur- I mean influenza and would miss work on Furiday at the furry least. So they sent us up to clean your purrfect office today."*

Karkat started to move a free hand towards his face, to hide his fear that everything had been blown. But he was shocked when Armstrong nodded in agreement and then started to walk away from them, *"Influenza?! Dreadful human disease, I shall have a note expressing my concerns for her well-being and beauty along with a bouquet of flowers sent to her."* He closed the door behind himself as he left.

The three stared at the door and then the two guys looked down at Nepeta who was wearing a huge grin upon her face. Karkat started to yammer, but stopped when she enthusiastically hugged him, *"I GOT TO ROLEPURRLAY KARKITTY! Didn't I do a good job?"*

"Yes you did, thanks for that. Can't believe the Commissioner is such a fucking idiot though."

"Motherfucking miracles."

"It was kind of obvious when you looked at the door Karkitty," Nepeta gave Karkat a sidelong glance with a malevolent grin.

"That's true, now let's find out what Mr. Pupa wants us to do next."

Karkat pulled out the notes:

Would you kindly get onto the Commissioner's personal computer and activate a series of programs.

The instructions on what to do are as follows...

Karkat hesitantly followed the instructions from the note. Fucking hell he wasn't any good with computers. Last time he messed with one it exploded and wiped out power for most of the Settlements for three weeks. But Mr. Pupa's notes were remarkably easy to follow.

Also, it helped that the Commissioner had his password on a note stuck to the monitor. **AUTHORITY.** Fitting password for the lunatic.

After doing some rudimentary programming following the instructions from Pupa. Karkat was instructed to use some wires that were conveniently hidden in Gamzee's pockets - "Fuck if I noticed those motherfucking things" - and make some connections between the Commissioner's computer and the phone on his desk.

"Don't know why the fuck we're doing this, but let's see what's next," Karkat flipped to the last page of the note and froze as he looked at the last instruction from their boss.

Well, their former boss.

Would you kindly meet your end at the hands of the APD.
I have no further use of you or your acquaintances as employees.

Karkat started to breathe heavily and was trying to keep from panicking. But they could see something was wrong.

"What's wrong? What does Mr. Pupurr want us to do next?"

"Yeah, what's the motherfucking deal? Why are you fucking sweating?"

Karkat took a deep breath and wadded up the note, tossing it into the trash, "THE FUCKING ASSHOLE HAS BETRAY-"

"I'll just check it out, the call said someone broke into the Commish's office," the three watched the door open revealing a cop who was laughing at someone still in the hallway, "What kind of fucking moron would do that here? I mean-"

He froze when he saw the trio clustered around the desk. Everyone muttered "Oh fuck" at the same time.

"HOLY SHIT, WE'VE GOT-"

The officer was cut short when a window pane shattered and a hole appeared in his forehead. He collapsed to the ground, lifeless.

"Oh shit, we are fucked."

"Karkitty..."

"Oh fuck oh fuck ohfuckohfuck...not fucking miracles..."

"Would You Kindly?, Part 5" by Wigmund

The trio were frozen in terror as they stared at the body of one of Alternia City's police force in front of them. A rapidly growing pool of blood grew around the human from the hole placed in his forehead. Thankfully, no other cops had seen - or heard - the incident, but that would change soon according to the approaching footsteps.

Gamzee was the first to break free. He reached over to Karkat and shook the terrified troll's shoulder, "Hey, we better fucking get the fuck out of here before the other fuckers catch us in here with a motherfucking body."

Karkat shook his head, "Goddammit Pupa, let's get out of her," he tossed the notepad to the side and grabbed Nepeta's hand. The trio then ran past the body and out of the office.

No one in the immediate area.

"This way, let's get to the fucking elevators."

And then they ran for their lives. Only slowing down as they passed near other cops, but since they got nothing more than confused looks they figured that no one was placing blame on them.

Yet.

Back in the Commissioner's Office, Sergeant Zahhak kneeled next to the body of the fallen APD officer.

"You claim that the fallen yelled that there was someone in the office before he was cut short?"

"Yes Sir."

"So why did you not rush here when he was cut short? What took you so long to check on his status?"

The officer being grilled by Sergeant Zahhak gulped nervously and tugged at his collar, he really didn't know why he took his time. Seriously, what were the chances of someone breaking into the Commish's Office? Plus the phone call sounded like a prank because it was so specific about three criminals who had escaped from the jail cells dressed in janitor's uniforms being there. He tried to explain that to the head of D.O.O.F., but that just earned him a lingering, unnerving stare and the a sinking feeling in his gut as he watched the Sergeant start to sweat.

"This is a fine mess. We need to sweep the headquarters for those three, I want them captured alive. But if they fight back, lethal force is authorized. Got that?"

The officer nodded, saluted the Sergeant and ran off to activate the alarms.

Equius stood up, looking at the body. Strange, the Karkat Gang were not known for

their use of firearms. Plus the shatter window panes and scorch marks on the floors also made him suspicious.

But the Sergeant was not an investigator, he was let Internal Affairs and Terezi handle this. They would figure out what happened.

In the mean time, he needed to apprehend those three criminals. They could not be allowed to escape. Escaping from the holding cells was bad enough, but raiding the Commissioner's Office? That was truly unforgivable and the thought of it made him sweat.

Well, sweat far more than usual.

They reached the elevators. Karkat was thankful about that at least as he pounded on the down button, nervously watching the slow crawl of the elevators towards them.

"Come on, come on, come fucking on you piece of shit."

"Karkitty, you need to calm down. Your fur is ruffled but nobody's affur us yet. We'd-"

Nepeta's eyes widened as she was cut short by the headquarter's intercom system blaring to life.

"Attention, we've got three criminals disguised as janitors loose in the HQ. They've murdered one officer and we can't let those shits get away. Try to apprehend alive, but lethal force is okay if they fight back."

Karkat narrowed his eyes and glared at her as he continued to pound on the button. Nepeta started to tear up as she started to look up and down the hallway, "They're really not gonna kill us are they Karkitty?"

"Knowing these fuckers, they're gonna claim we're fighting back even if we lie down on the ground with our hands on our heads."

Nepeta started to sob quietly, Karkat sighed heavily but stopped when the elevator doors opened.

No one inside.

The trio jumped in and Karkat punched a button for the garage level. He held that button and another.

"Why the fuck are you doing that?"

"It's some kind of emergency access elevators have. Saw it on some documentary." The doors closed and the elevator started its downward journey.

But then the intercoms blared to life again, "Pyrope's tracked their scent to the elevators, they're heading for the garage!"

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck"

"So what's the fucking plan once we get to the garage my friend?"

Karkat glanced at Nepeta, "We're gonna drive out of here."

Nepeta smiled nervously at him, he smiled back, thankful that something Mr. Pupa had given them would be of some use.

The doors opened and they ran into the garage, alarm klaxons were flashing and they could hear yelling from elsewhere, but there were no cops.

"Alright Nep, do your thing."

Nepeta nodded and used her ring to transform into the Catcar. Gamzee and Karkat climbed inside, "FLOOR IT, LET'S GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

The car's tires squealed and smoke as Nepeta bolted for the garage exit. As they neared, everyone's hearts dropped. Cops were waiting for them.

Guns drawn.

Karkat and Gamzee ducked down as bullets flew past and into the car, Nepeta made pained noises but continued through the barricade.

At least until she hit the spike strips the cops had activated.

Karkat clenched his eyes as the tires exploded and he listened to Nepeta's muffled sobbing. The car flew out of the garage and across the busy street and stopped next to a entrance to a subway station. Karkat and Gamzee quickly got out of the car, which then reverted back to Nepeta's usual form.

Usual except for the bleeding wounds all over her body, none of them looked serious but her hands and feet were going to need to heal before she could walk or hold things again.

Karkat picked Nepeta up and positioned her on his back, she slung her arms around his neck and sobbed quietly into his ear.

"I'm...I'm sorry Nepeta..."

She didn't respond, except by tightening her grip.

"Quick Gamz, down into the subway. We'll lose the fucking cops in the sewers."

They ran down into through the subway station until they reached the platform. By then it was obvious the cops had entered the place, people were panicking and giving them horrified glances.

Gamzee pushed through the crowds and to a locked door that would allow them to enter the sewers.

"Fuck, can you pick that lock before we get ventilated?"

"Miracles are on our side my fucking buddy."

Gamzee started fiddling with the lock as Karkat nervously watched the crowd, Nepeta crying on his shoulders.

It was then that the first cop appeared through the crowd, "STOP YOU FUCKING CROOKS!" He then drew his gun and pointed it at the trio.

Gamzee opened the door as the first bullet buried itself into the wall next to them. They jumped inside and closed the door, more bullets impacted against the metal barrier that was now between them and a growing crowd of furious police officers. Gamzee fiddled with the door again and then smiled.

"You just have to fucking believe my doubtful leader. All will fucking come together if you let the fucking miracles work."

"What did you do?"

"Locked the door and fucking broke it" Gamzee smiled at Karkat as he led them away from the door, "No one's gonna fucking follow us friend. Now I think you better fucking lead us out of here."

Gamzee started to reach for Nepeta, "[color="#2b0057"]Let me hold her, I-[color]" He stopped when the girl shook her head and hugged Karkat tightly.

"No, I'm holding her. It's my fucking fault she's hurt. It's my responsibility...."

Karkat sniffed and tried to blink back tears, "Let's just get the fuck out of this area. If we can get to the Settlements we should be able to escape any patrols." Karkat started walking into the darkness, Nepeta on his shoulders and Gamzee following behind him.

It was a long journey. At one point the trio stopped so Karkat could tear off strips of his uniform and patch Nepeta's hands and feet. He looked her over and was relieved that the rest of her wounds were nothing more than scratches and grazing wounds. No bullets lodged in her.

Nepeta had stopped crying thankfully, but she squeaked in terror when she noticed the body in the alcove they were using to rest.

"Karkat! Who is that?"

Karkat went over to the body and rolled it over. The smell was bad, but he had seen and messed with bodies that were far worse. A pair of shades covered the eyes, one of the lens blown out by a bullet that had left the back of the skull a ruined mess. Other bullet entry and exit wounds covered the body. The troll looked around the area they were in and noticed the hundreds of bullet marks that scarred the brickwork.

"I think it's one of those fucking Strider clones, but fuck if I know what got him."

"I fucking think we shouldn't stay here much longer. Doesn't feel fucking right here."

"I know what you mean, we're going now. I just wanted to patch Nepeta up a bit."

Karkat picked Nepeta back up and they all headed onward.

After several hours, Nepeta said they were in the Settlements so they went topside. From then on it was going from alleyway to alleyway, making sure to stay hidden whenever they saw a squad car pass by.

It didn't take much longer for them to reach their apartment.

Or at least where the apartment would have been if the building wasn't in flames.

The trio watched their home burn.

Gamzee collapsed to the ground and started to sob.

Karkat looked down at his friend, watching him cry for the first time in the time he's known him.

"Karkitty...where will we go now?..."

"I...I don't know Nepeta...I don't know..."

"Would You Kindly?, Part 6" by Wigmund

Karkat rubbed Gamzee's back as the troll shuddered in grief. Nepeta was sitting behind Karkat, curled against him trying to ignore the sirens of the fire trucks that were putting out the flames that had consumed the only true home any of them had known in years.

"It's gonna be alright pal, everything's gonna be alright. We're alive and we can start over."

Gamzee just sobbed loudly and leaned against the dumpster they were hiding behind. "We lived through Mr. Pupa's fucking back-stabbing and we escaped from the fucking flatfeet. Isn't that enough of a mira-"

Gamzee spun towards Karkat, rage in his eyes, "DON'T YOU FUCKING MENTION MIRACLES TO ME YOU MOTHERFUCKING SON OF A BITCH!"

Karkat pulled back from the suddenly emotional troll. Nepeta curled into a ball and watched them from underneath the janitor's uniform she was still wearing from the police headquarters - they had lost all of their original clothes while they fled for their lives. She didn't know what to do as Karkat crawled backwards from Gamzee who had gotten up and was stalking after his friend.

"DON'T YOU MENTION THEM KARKAT. DON'T YOU DARE! WE'VE LOST EVERYTHING TODAY! I'VE LOST THE LAST THINGS I HAD FROM MY OLD LIFE....my grandfather...the only guy...the only one..."

Gamzee had grabbed Karkat and pulled him close, hugging him.

"I've lost everything that reminded me of the guy who raised me Karkat."

Karkat pulled himself away from Gamzee, "I...I didn't know man, was that what you fucking kept in your room? All those books and shit we looted from that mansion?" Gamzee nodded.

"That was your old home? Why...why didn't you go back? You could have had a better life than starving with us on the streets all of these years, you could have avoided becoming a slave when I made that fucking deal with Pupa, you could have enjoyed life."

"No. I wouldn't have. The only family I loved, the only one who cared about me was my grandfather...and he...he..."

"He was one of those bodies we found you curled next to."

Gamzee nodded again, his body shaking from grief and the onslaught of repressed memories. Nepeta had pulled herself to her feet and surprised the scared sopor addict when she wrapped her arms around him and started to weep into his back.

"So...we were..."

"You two became my family, but I couldn't let go of memories of my grandfather. The Old Goat was the guy who fucking raised me Karkat."

"And you've lost the last things that reminded you of him, I'm sorry man. I'm so sorry I brought this on us. I'm fucking sorry Gamzee," Karkat wiped away tears.

Gamzee face broke into a small smile and he pulled Nepeta in front of himself and then embraced her and Karkat, "It's not your fucking fault my motherfucking pals. It's that motherfucker Pupa who did this. Fucker set us up with that heist, probably set

fire to our place to cover any other tracks linking us to him. Don't fucking beat yourself up Karkat, you've got too fucking much on your shoulders."

The trio pulled away from each other, Gamzee picked Nepeta up on his back and they started walking away from the place they once called home.

"So...so where are we going to live now Karkitty? What are in fur now?"

Karkat looked up at Nepeta, her eyes shining with tears in the low light of the alleyway, and smiled, "Well, I wasn't a complete fucking moron while we worked for Pupa. I did figure out a couple of things while working with the fucking asshole."

"What do you mean Karkitty?"

Karkat puffed up and put on a huge grin to cheer up his companions, "Well, I managed to stash away some shit that I'm damned sure Pupa didn't know about so we don't have to worry about starving."

"Miracles."

"PURRFECT!"

"Also, I still fucking remember those damned lessons Slick stabbed into me along with some shit I picked up watching Pupa while we were at his place."

Karkat stopped, Gamzee turned to face him with Nepeta peeking over his shoulder, "We're gonna start our own fucking gang."

Both of his friends' jaws dropped and they started babbling at him.

"Think about it, we could blaze a path of revenge against everyone and we could help others who've lived in the gutters like us. We will take what the rich fuckers call the cancer of the city and make them into something."

"But what about the other gangs? The motherfucking Midnight Crew, Felt, Striders and the Kingpin's shithheads? What about Mr. Pupa?"

"They won't see a fucking thing coming," Karkat punched Gamzee in the shoulder and beamed at Nepeta.

The three smiled and they resumed their journey through the Settlements.

Gamzee glanced at Karkat, "So where are we fucking gonna set up?" The purple blood glanced up in the night air, clouds blocking out the few stars that could pierce the light haze of Alternia City, "The fucking Crew runs the Narrows, The Felt are over on Alternia Island with the Kingpin's Mafia in Foundry and the Striders in Old Town...."

Gamzee shifted Nepeta on his back, "I guess we could set up in the Settlements," he looked over at Karkat who nodded his head.

"Perfect, everyone does shit here but no one really claims it. This is the worst-off area of the city as well. Everyone looking down on them. They just need someone who can really protect them from the other fucking gangs."

"But what about Mr. Pupurr? He won't let us just have a purrade near him."

"Fuck him, he declared war on us first with this bullshit. We'll bid our time, build up the gang, wait until the moment is right and show everyone that we're not some fucking kind of comedy relief."

"Alright my motherfucking best friend, we've got a plan. But right now we've got a

bigger fucking problem."

"What's that?"

"Where are we gonna fucking sleep tonight?"

"Well, Miss Pisces' Shelter isn't too far away. Plus nobody fucking messes with that place. So we'll be bunking there while I go pick up the shit I've left around the city and talk to some people."

"Yay! I love Miss Pisces' place!"

The Karkat Gang, now the beginnings of the Carcino Gang, walked into the night, ready to turn the recent tragedies into something better.

Somewhere else in the city, a new piece was put on the chessboard that was Alternia City.

"Everything is going as you had planned, my love."

"Not exactly. But it, uh, helps when you can turn any outcome into something, um, favorable."